





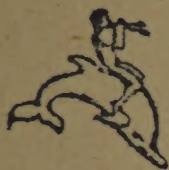
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# SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE

BY  
STEWART BEACH

FORMERLY LECTURER ON SHORT-STORY  
WRITING IN NEW YORK UNIVERSITY



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## PREFACE

IT is often asserted that short-story writing cannot be taught, and I am so thoroughly in agreement with the statement that I feel this book requires some word of explanation. When one speaks of writing short stories, the two processes which must be fused in the finished product are rarely separated in the speaker's mind. That there are two distinct processes can hardly be refuted. The first is the writer's study of the technique by which short stories are constructed; the second is the ability to put this purely craftsman's knowledge into practice plus a native genius for creating men, women, and situations in fiction.

The second of these essentials I am perfectly willing to admit cannot be taught. Given an inexperienced writer with ability, his knowledge of creating effects, or of perfecting those he creates, may be increased by personal instruction. But this again is rather more a perfecting of his craftsmanship than an infusion of any power which will enable him to create short stories. Native ability must be present; if he lacks that, no amount of instruction will teach him to write fiction. Nor do I know of any test for the presence of this



ability excepting that of experiment by the prospective writer himself. He alone can discover his own capabilities, and the first step in that direction is to learn the technique of the short story.

Now this is no more and no less than learning the essentials of a good short story and the way they are put together. It is as ridiculous to state that the method cannot be taught as to maintain that a carpenter is unable to teach a novice how to drive a nail. I believe there are some persons who never learn to drive a nail properly, although presumably they are in the minority. There is a somewhat larger group which could never learn to write a short story no matter how much time was spent in studying the method. Still, the method can be explained to them as readily as to the person who may profit by instruction and learn to write successful short stories. It is entirely up to the individual, his native ability, and his willingness to study technique.

This manual pretends to nothing more than an analysis of the various factors which must be fused in a short story and the manner in which that fusion is accomplished. It is not concerned with the short story as literature, nor does it attempt to differentiate between a merely salable short story and one which is artistic as well. In a word, it goes as far as one can go in teaching short-story writing and no



farther. To use a quite homely figure, it takes the short story apart and shows what makes the wheels go round.

In speaking of the short story, I have in mind the typical short story as it appears in the magazines to-day. I have chosen "typical" with some exactness to define a category which includes an impressive percentage of the brief magazine fiction each week, month, and year. But because it is typical this large class should not be understood to comprise merely "average" stories. The term covers all those stories which conform in a general way at all points with the pattern over which the great majority of stories are written. It is not used in a critical sense: these "typical" stories may be good or bad, but they do follow the general pattern analyzed in these chapters.

As for the stories which make up the other portion, many of them are not short stories at all in the specialized definition which the term has come to possess; others, more nearly approximating the typical, are products of an individual genius which makes generalization valueless. There are a few critics who maintain that in these "individual" stories alone is the real art of the short story to be found and who deplore the story susceptible of generalized analysis as a routine product, devoid of literary value. While I recognize the basis of this horror of analysis, I am by no



means disposed to agree that it is valid. I have seen quite as many formless stories creaking along to their climaxes upon obvious machinery as stories whose technique is clear-cut and typical. And I believe that quite as many typical short stories touch the peak of art as do those whose technique branches off toward the unusual. Let's be fair about all this: the proof of the story lies in its own effectiveness. Whether typical or individual, if the author succeeds in producing an effective, artistic short story, the method is unimportant. That it is possible to succeed with either technique has been proved countless times. That it is, however, usually best for the inexperienced writer to perfect himself in the typical technique first, I trust this study will demonstrate. If later he desires to modify the typical, or to leave it altogether, the proficiency he has acquired in creating effects and his mastery of the mechanics of the short story will still be of the highest practical value.

But a study of the typical short-story technique is justified not only for those who wish to apply it to writing. The short story, more than any other literary form, is the characteristic fiction of twentieth-century America. Quite as definitely as twelfth-century Italy expressed itself through the *novella* or Elizabethan England through the drama, twentieth-century America reproduces itself in the short



story. There, in microcosm, is a cross-section of America, its hopes, its fears, its cowardices, its braveries, its point of view, its customs. I have never done the exercise, but I feel sure that were one to read every short story which had appeared in every American magazine during a single month, there would emerge a complete composite picture of life in these United States. For the typical short story in the past quarter-century, and particularly since the World War, has more and more avoided unusual aspects and persons to find its interest in the common but appealing problems of the life about us. It has ignored kings and queens for "doctors, lawyers, merchants, chiefs." In many stanzas, in many cantos, it sings the saga of America. For that reason it is interesting, significant.

However much one may feel that the average of magazine short stories lies far below the plane which may be called literature, one cannot ignore the vital qualities of this characteristic fiction form. And therefore, even though one never expects to roll paper in typewriter for a go at that story which is traditionally supposed to lie within each of us, an understanding of the typical short-story technique contributes toward a wider understanding of the whole contemporary fiction panorama.

In deliberately choosing to confine this study to the typical short story, I have naturally

been forced to ignore the interesting variation which verges more on the tale than upon the more usual short-story type. And while this omission may seem a deficiency to some, I feel on the whole that it will lessen the opportunity for confusion in the reader's mind. To discuss both together would mean the constant reiteration of exceptions in the one form which are not true of the other, and this would prove not only bewildering but tiresome. Nor is that the only reason. The fact that a large percentage of modern short stories conform to the typical pattern indicates that editors are more interested in purchasing the typical than the unusual. I have been influenced by this consideration to feel that a practical manual, keeping close to actual conditions faced by the writer in marketing his product, would be of greater value than a more academic discussion of differences between the two forms.

Perhaps one more word of explanation is necessary. In analyzing what I have called "the X-ray method" of short-story writing, I am quite aware that frequent dogmatic statements are made which any reader who takes the pains may find violated in current magazine stories. I have usually felt in such instances that the author might have conformed to the general practice had he reworked his materials slightly and actually heightened the effectiveness of his story thereby. However true that



may be, the violations are to be found. But the inexperienced writer will be wise to avoid violation of the rules of procedure mentioned in these chapters, however dogmatic he may occasionally feel them to be, until he has mastered technique. When craftsmanship is thoroughly learned, the writer will know instinctively when such violations are plausible and when they should be circumvented. I have felt it wiser to omit all mention of such exceptions in the text in order to avoid confusion.

This study was originally prepared for lectures in New York University. Since that time the materials have formed the basis of lectures for the Department of Education of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and have been considerably expanded and revised for publication.

STEWART BEACH







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# SHORT-STORY TECHNIQUE



## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCING THE X-RAY METHOD

THERE is an ancient legend running through the traditions of newspaperdom to the effect that all city editors are hard-boiled. With it goes the corollary substantiation, repeated to every trembling cub when first he presents himself for duty. It recites the particular habit of the particular city editor who rules the particular city room in which the scene is temporarily set: He sends you out to interview impossible, publicity-shy dignitaries whose whereabouts are always a mystery and who, should you even have the luck to find them, would be guarded against undesirable reporters by a small army of secretaries. But should you falter at the desk and ask this particular city editor for a clue to work upon, he snaps out sharply without looking up:

“Find him, and get the story.”

Probably the tale is true. But that is neither here nor there. It bears repetition merely to illustrate the first essential of the short story — a character. “Find him, and



get the story," might well be the curt direction of an all-powerful city editor, if there were one, sitting over a roomful of short-story writers. For until the author has found his man, he cannot get the story; and the story's effectiveness is compounded in direct ratio to the interest which is aroused in the man who now becomes an actor in fiction.

The greatest interest of the world we live in is its men and women. Probably it always has been, although in this day of metropolitan journalism and gigantic press associations stretching their lines across the world, it is more obvious than ever before. Newspapers stress the personal lives of prominent men and women who come into the news, casting tons of molten metal into neighborly gossip to be devoured with avid daily interest by millions of readers. "The President arose at 7.57 this morning and breakfasted at 8.45. His breakfast consisted of a grapefruit, two four-minute eggs, dry toast, coffee with one lump of sugar and no cream." Likewise, the magazines. Not so many years ago an inspired editor remembered the forgotten man. Magazines began printing columns about his formula for success, with pictures of the unused dog house which became the nucleus of a half-million-dollar chicken-raising venture, or the nest-egg pharmacy out in Nebraska which hatched a nation-wide chain of drug stores. And again

the stories were devoured with the same avid interest by rapidly increasing circulations. For the great periodical press had found what the Nation's readers wanted — men and women.

Likewise, the short story. Readers who find their interest in people gratified by the newspapers and by the general pages of their favorite magazines look for it to be satisfied as well in fiction. There is still a taste for the weird story of which Poe was such a master; there is still a fondness here and there for the costume piece through which puppet knights strut in chain mail succoring beautiful ladies. But by far the greatest crop of magazine fiction is raised in fields which are familiar to the hitherto forgotten man. Its actors live just around the corner in that new subdivision which the realtors sliced from John Appleby's back forty. They scan the sporting pages along with the coffee and toast in the morning and complain about increased taxes. Their children occasionally keep the car out too late at night and form a part of that terrible younger generation. Their sons go off to New York and make fortunes in Wall Street sometimes, but more often they marry the daughter of the president of the Farmers' and Drovers' National Bank and settle down. In a word, they are neighbors, with all of the fascinating mystery which fills all neighbors' lives for those



who live beside them. What happens behind the closed doors and drawn shades of the house across the street? How are the Barnses able to afford that new expensive car? What do the Smiths think of the wife their son brought home from Chicago? All of these are the concerns of neighbors, and to all of them the short story brings at least a vicarious answer.

There was a time when high tragedy could never be the lot of the people — in so far as literature was concerned. A prince of the blood, a nobleman, might know tragedy — but never a commoner. The man who discovered that tragedy beats not alone in noble breasts made a fortune from exploiting his find, and all literature enjoyed a bull market. Something similar occurred with the short story not so long ago when writers began to learn that, while tired business men and weary housewives enjoyed reading romance and high adventure, it appealed to them most when it concerned persons whose points of view were familiar. To-day the tremendous output of short fiction in the magazines is a constantly growing proof of their applause.

Now the modern short-story writer has put to use this interest in men and women in a fairly consistent manner by what — in order to impress the process — might be termed “the X-ray method.” It is an ingeniously simple scheme which depends for its success upon the

author's borrowing one leaf from the book of the theater and another from the clinical notes of the doctor. Instead of *telling* a story about a group of characters or about something which happened to some one, the author places one character under the X-ray and allows his readers to see his thoughts as well as his actions. They see him faced by some crisis, they watch his reactions, they see his various false starts in the solution of his crisis, and they see him, finally, either overcome his difficulty or be beaten by it. There have been ramifications to the action, there have been complications, but all of these the reader has seen through the consciousness of the *chief actor*. There have been *minor actors*, too, but the reader has watched their exits and entrances through the eyes of the chief actor. He has been interested in them, but his interest has been colored by the light in which the chief actor regards them. For this chief actor is a temperamental chap. His name blazes in incandescents throughout the story, and he is jealous of being overshadowed by the minor actors who must play a part in his drama.

Starring this chief actor is the primary consideration in writing the modern short story. Upon its understanding and skillful employment hang all the other mechanics of short fiction. Suspense, dramatic interest, absorbing climax, and dénouement all depend upon



focusing the action through the consciousness of the chief actor. Analyzing the process, it merely means that the story holds the interest, not because its episodes are engrossing in themselves, but because the chief actor, who has caught the reader's attention, is living through them. If the chief actor were suddenly to leave the stage, the events themselves might still be potentially interesting. But the reader's attention would vanish, somewhat as a father's interest might wane in a football team from which his son had been dropped.

The truth of this is apparent enough in what is usually thought of as a "character" story; it is not always so apparent in the story whose plot interest seems to overshadow the appeal of its actors. Detective-story heroes, for example, often appear to be little more than lay figures. A few sharp, definitive strokes by the author serve to set them in the reader's mind as familiar types. Having recognized his detective, the reader is impatient of further characterization; his attention seems to turn from actor to episodes. Nevertheless, it is only through the chief actor of the detective story — lay figure though he be — that the author may fix and hold the interest of his reader upon the baffling mystery. For the reader sees the mystery *through* Sherlock Holmes. The action leading up to the breathtaking conclusion may be engrossing, thrilling,

but the story bears unity and attention-fixing qualities only because it is seen through the consciousness of Holmes. One visualizes the great detective: one wants to find out *how* he will solve this particular riddle.

That sentence is the short story in a nutshell: "One visualizes him: one wants to find out *how* he will solve this particular riddle." Detective story or simple character story, the writer's point of attack is the same. First, the actor; then the problem he faces. The problem may be, as with Sherlock Holmes, to apprehend the perpetrator of some particularly baffling crime. Or it may be the quandary of the poor clerk who finds himself in love with his wealthy employer's daughter and strives to bring himself before her in so favorable a light that she will return his love. In both cases the writer's problem — however different may be that of the actors — is the same. He must choose his chief actor, place him in a certain situation, faced with a certain problem, and show him working through it to a solution.

Just as the curtain of a theater rises to discover certain actors in a certain situation to the audience, so the opening paragraphs of a story discover to the reader a particular actor in a certain situation, faced with the necessity of solving a certain problem. Analyze the thought currents of the reader's mind and you find him saying at this uncertain moment of



deciding whether to read the story in the magazine before him: "Well, this beginning promises something interesting. I wonder if this fellow will succeed in overcoming his difficulty. I wonder if he will overcome it at all. It looks a bit doubtful. I'll read on and find out." So he continues, and when the last paragraph is finished, the author has answered his questions.

It is above all else important to visualize the story in terms of its chief actor. Upon him the author focuses the attention of the reader and through him he focuses the stream of action. Minor actors react to him or he reacts to them, but the focus of the story never shifts from the chief actor's solution of his problem, and the stream of action never flows but through his consciousness. The reason for this is simple and inherent in the X-ray method of presentation. The author sets out to show a man working through a certain problem to its conclusion. That is the story he is telling. He is not, primarily, describing an exciting sequence of events; he is showing the chief actor as he lives through those events. The moment he moves the focus of the story from the chief actor to one of the minor actors, he begins to tell another man's story. It may be interesting, it might be absorbing, but it is not the story which the author set out to tell. Switching the focus of the action switches also the interest.

And because of the short story's brevity, a change in the focus of interest is confusing to the reader. A readjustment of his own point of view is necessary in shifting from one actor's thoughts to another's. In the process, the interest of the story becomes diffuse. There should be no subplots in a short story, and to direct the focus through a minor actor's consciousness is to introduce a subplot. The author has time to tell dramatically but a single tale, and that is the story which he began in the first paragraph — the chief actor's solution of his problem.

To illustrate the limitations which this *unity of focus* places upon the author, return to the clerk-employer's-daughter theme, the prototype of a thousand stories. The actors are indicated as the clerk and the daughter, with the father thrown in, perhaps, for good measure. Each of the actors is vitally concerned in the solution of the clerk's problem, but it is the clerk himself who must work it out. It is his story. His plans to make sufficient income to offer the girl a comfortable home, his difficulties in bringing himself favorably to her attention, his efforts to make her return his love — all these are his peculiar tasks. Together they compound the working-out of the problem which faces him: to marry his employer's daughter.

The author, therefore, fixes his reader's in-



terest upon the clerk alone, and the reader wonders as he reads over the first paragraphs of the story: "Will the clerk be able to break down the barriers which seem to stand between him and his employer's daughter? Will he finally marry her?" To be sure, the reader is also interested in the young lady and in her reactions to the clerk, but only because she is the object of the clerk's struggle. The reader's interest in her is comparable to that which he might have in his best friend's fiancée: he is interested in her, but primarily because of her relation to his friend.

Upon and through the clerk, then, the focus of the story is fixed. Now this focus is synonymous with the senses of the chief actor — in this case, the clerk. To maintain a *unity of focus* means simply that no action must be shown which the chief actor does not witness himself, have reported to him by one of the minor actors, or feel. To illustrate: if the first scene of the clerk-employer's-daughter story shows the clerk watching from his desk in the corner while the young lady enters her father's office, and informs the reader that in his inmost thoughts the clerk worships her, the action must not thereupon shift behind the ground-glass door of the private office to show the girl in conversation with her father. To move from the clerk's desk to his employer's would be to change the story's focus, because

the clerk's eyes cannot follow beyond the closed door nor can his ears hear the conversation.

The necessity of maintaining this unity of focus arises from the X-ray method of presentation. The author, it should be emphasized again, is *not* telling a story which concerns the interesting sequence of events in which a certain group of characters chanced to be involved. He is showing one person — the chief actor — as he meets and passes through a crucial situation in his life. That others are involved in the events is only incidental — so far as the author is concerned. No doubt their stories are interesting, too, if one had a mind to tell them. But the author hasn't. He is telling a single story, and he maintains his unity of focus because, in altering it, he would necessarily begin another story.

If, to go back to our clerk, the author were to leave this troubled young man and reveal, through a scene in his employer's home, that the young lady is likewise attracted to him, but fears that he may be interested in her money; if he were to disclose, through a private conversation between the clerk's employer and the office manager, that the employer is watching his progress and nodding his head approvingly, if he were to report any scene at all in which the clerk did not play a part, he would be placing his reader in possession of facts before



they had been brought to the clerk's attention. And the plan of the X-ray method is that the reader shall follow the progress of the story only through the chief actor's consciousness. He shall receive no new information which does not come simultaneously to the chief actor; and, conversely, perhaps, he shall be given the advantage of all the information relevant to the plot which the chief actor possesses.

This, then, is the significance of the X-ray method. Under analysis, it appears to make each reader play in his mind the rôle of chief actor. For he is told everything which the chief actor knows in so far as it has a bearing upon the story; he learns nothing which the chief actor may not know, he sees nothing which the chief actor may not see.

Obviously, the reader's reactions to situations and to persons may differ somewhat from those of the chief actor. Particularly in the case of mystery stories, this possible difference of opinion is a healthy critical sign of the reader's interest. He says to himself: "This chap is entirely wrong in his deductions; he is taking the wrong road to apprehend the perpetrator of this crime. I should have done thus and so." But no matter what the reader would have done himself to solve the mystery, he reads on fascinated to discover just how the chief actor does it. And in the end, whether he would have taken a different or the same

road to the solution, he is as pleased and as satisfied as though he had actually been the chief actor himself.

This is the great test of a short story's effectiveness: that it captures the attention of the reader closely enough to make him imagine himself for the time being as the chief actor of the story. Violating the unity of focus, shifting from the point of view of one actor to that of another, makes such a result impossible, for the reader is never given an opportunity of slipping completely into one character before he is called upon to play another part. The story becomes to his bewildered senses a badly directed play in which he is vainly trying to play all the rôles.

### ILLUSTRATIVE SUGGESTIONS

1. Since each of the chapters to follow, with the possible exception of the last, is dependent upon a complete understanding of what has gone before, the reader should test himself and make sure that he has grasped the meaning of each step in the X-ray method before going further. Perhaps the simplest test is to be found in informal definition. When the following questions can be readily answered the reader should be ready to proceed:

- a. What is the *chief actor*?
- b. Wherein does his function in the story differ from that of the *minor actors*?
- c. What is meant by *unity of focus*? How is it maintained? Why should its violation be avoided?



- d.* In what way does the author of the short story contrive to make the action seem to be happening while the reader turns the pages rather than a series of narrated episodes?
- e.* In what sort of situation is the chief actor when the story begins? How is this situation developed in the story?

2. If the reader has not already done so, he should turn immediately to the two stories which follow the text. A close study of the analysis should be reserved until he has progressed further, but it will be well to read the stories immediately as a basis for testing points of technique discussed in the text.

3. Read as many magazine stories as possible and study their technique in conjunction with your reading of this manual. Do not select the stories with a view to finding the best possible. The ineffective examples will afford valuable opportunities to observe faults which the reader may learn to avoid in his own work.

## CHAPTER II

### SNARES FOR THE READER'S ATTENTION

EVERY short story concerns a crucial situation in the life of its chief actor. Not that tragedy must lurk at the conclusion. There are crises in life which one does not meet at the point of a gun. Take Mary Smith, for example, whose husband brought her back from New York to his village home in Nebraska. The animosity of the villagers made John unhappy and left her resentful. How could she put herself in the good graces of the local sewing circle? There was a crisis which she met and conquered. Jim Leonard also faced a crisis. His wife, who was an admirable person in most ways, as Jim realized, couldn't quite resist casting longing eyes at the remaining rungs of the social ladder. How to break her of being a climber puzzled Jim. Yet he managed it and brought contentment back to his home.

An analysis of current magazines discloses a heavy percentage of stories dealing with the minor, rather than the major, crises of life. Behind this fact lies, again, the world's augmented interest in the lesser and more familiar crises of its men and women. The short stories which reveal them are often simple and not over-

loaded with tense action. But they frequently require even more careful construction than the tragic, two-gun mysteries bristling with sliding panels and clutching hands, because they possess none of these artificial, tension-creating mechanics to enliven them.

The short story, in so far as its scope is concerned, is the simplest form of fiction. Unlike the novel, it lacks space to unfold a complex situation — to carry a large group of characters in their complicated relationships through a leisurely period of years during which each of them undergoes inevitable changes. It has space only to record the brief history of one character at a crucial point in his life. A novel may take the same character, carry him through boyhood, reach the crucial situation, and pass beyond it into the dwindling years, still holding the interest of its readers because it has full opportunity to cover a broad canvas, fix attention variously upon the many by-paths which swerve off from every life.

The short story has no such scope. It disregards the boyhood days, disregards the dwindling years. It picks up its chief actor at a crucial moment, takes him through it, and sets him down, his problem of the moment solved, life stretching on before. It begins and it ends. The novel may give a "slice of life," discover its hero on an uneventful day of his life and leave him upon another uneventful day several years



removed. Not so the short story. Its ending is as final as that conclusion of the fairy stories: "And they lived happily ever after." One never pauses to consider whether the story-book prince and princess actually will live happily ever after; nor should one wonder when the short story ends whether there are disturbing factors which might alter the chief actor's situation after solving his problem. For the author has faced him with a crucial moment: he has met it, passed through it, and solved the problem which it presented. Therefore, the story which the author set out to tell in the first paragraph has ended.

Had the author not fixed the attention of his reader upon one actor alone, but divided it among several, the ending might not have been so definite and satisfying. If the reader stopped to think of it, he might reason that while the chief actor's problem had been solved, a minor actor or two was not disposed of in the dénouement. But the X-ray method makes dissatisfaction upon the reader's part impossible. After all, why should he trouble about the minor actors? For he has been following other men and women who came into the story only incidentally as they touched the chief actor. When the chief actor has solved his problem, therefore, the reader is completely satisfied. The story is finished.

This necessity of a definite conclusion natu-

rally presupposes a story for which such a conclusion is possible — a problem for the chief actor which may be solved. Not all fiction material lends itself to molding in such a way that not only a beginning but an ending is possible. One of the writer's tasks is to make sure that his ending is definite, convincing, and satisfying to the reader. There are plenty of problems to which the author may state a solution, but whether the solution would convince is quite another matter.

Suppose, for example, that the head of a rescue mission in New York City is the chief actor. Among the occasional visitors to his mission is a man whom he recognizes as a notorious criminal. The mission worker believes that he sees excellent qualities in the man and attempts to help him in going straight. But the criminal is not to be persuaded, although he seems to consider the idea rather favorably. Finally, the mission worker arranges what he considers a supreme test for his hopeful. The criminal meets it and because of this experience renounces forever a life of crime. Or, reverse the situations of the two men in the story and make the criminal the chief actor, the stream of action flowing through his consciousness. The result is the same, and the theme illustrates two possibilities for treating a type of subject which often appeals to inexperienced writers because of its obviously tense climax.

In each case, the author leaves the reader with the assurance that his character will not go back to the old way; that the reform is permanent. But the reader is not satisfied. He has been shown a man whose life has been set for years in a certain mold and is asked to believe that one outstanding experience has irrevocably altered him. The reader is doubtful. "Life," he reasons, somewhat bromidically but none the less practically, "is not like that." Nor is it — in the short story.

Lives are occasionally altered entirely by a single vivid experience — that need not be doubted. But such situations are properly the concern of the novelist with ample space to build up his characterization through a series of revealing episodes which will justify such a sudden about face. The short story has no such opportunity. It travels a narrow path and its plot is kept simple and plausible because its author will have no space to include long scenes which are really little more than demonstrations of conflicting character traits. It is a good rule to remember that no plot is a short-story plot if its conclusion depends upon a change in character.

No, the short-story writer lacks opportunity to prepare his reader for elaborate changes in character. It is task enough to create one actor, consistent in movement and thought, in the brief space at his disposal. Therefore, he



seeks every means at his command for simplification. He has gone a long way in focusing the story upon and through a single actor. But he goes a step farther: he not only focuses upon a single actor, he also bases his story upon *a single characteristic of his chief actor*. Although the story is not concerned with elaborate changes of character — is not properly concerned with character development at all — it is definitely concerned with — is based upon, in fact — a single characteristic of the all-important chief actor.

To illustrate, suppose that the chief actor is a detective. He is brave, clever, and possesses all of the attributes which detectives in fiction are bound to have. One characteristic, however, fixes him as an individual, sets him off in the reader's mind as different from other detectives, and is, in fact, so basic that without it the story would have been no story at all. This particular detective owes his success in running down criminals to his keenness in out-guessing them. Upon some of his more important cases he never leaves his office until he is sure of the guilty one and where he may be found. With the facts once in his mind, instead of tracking a variety of possible clues, he shuts himself up alone and gradually builds up a hypothetical chain of acts from which he deduces the probable moves of the criminal and the best way to apprehend him. This, in so

far as the story goes, is his *basic characteristic*, for it is upon this characteristic that the story will be based.

At the beginning of the story the author displays this basic characteristic; through the story it runs as the detective's guesses are borne out at every point. The climax is reached, the supreme guess upon the detective's part, and the criminal is in the net. Or perhaps the author is giving the other sort of twist to his story: making the great detective so intent upon his deductions that he overlooks some quite obvious clue and thereby loses his quarry. Either ending serves to illustrate the point, for in each it is the basic characteristic which makes the story worth telling in the first place, which carries it along, and finally motivates the crucial situation.

Next to the chief actor himself, without whom the story could hardly be a story at all, the basic characteristic is the most important element. It is fair to say that without that, too, the story could hardly be a story at all. For it is through the basic characteristic that the attention of the reader is caught. He becomes interested in the chief actor because of the character the author gives him. And the whole key to his character is his basic characteristic.

The author's first task in producing a successful short story is to catch the eye of the

reader. No person cares to read fiction which does not seize his interest immediately — he will hardly read far in a story whose characters fail to promise something appealing from the first paragraph. The chief actor's introduction gives him the focus of the story; but he needs to know something more — something about the chief actor which will attract him to this protagonist whose fortunes the author desires him to follow, something which induces him to believe the chief actor's story interesting. The basic characteristic adds that appeal and sets, as well, the keynote of the story. For example, suppose a story begins thus:

When Helen Blake and young Henry Carey were united in holy wedlock, there were three things Helen guessed her husband knew about her, and one which she hoped he did not. He knew that she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen, he knew that she had devastating brown eyes, he knew that he loved her madly. He did not know, hoped Helen, that she was supremely selfish.

Helen is the chief actor in the story, and obviously her selfishness is to be the basic characteristic. Does the reader find an appeal in a story about a selfish woman? At least, the author has made his bid for interest and has given, in the shortest space possible, a clue to his chief actor's character. Without preliminary faltering, he has introduced the chief actor and the basic characteristic upon which



the story is to turn. He has given the direction of the action and is now ready to set it in motion.

This use of the basic characteristic reduces character to its simplest terms. When it has been introduced, the author may stand back and say to his reader: "I have now given you a chief actor and I have shown you also the sort of person he is, and thereby hinted at the reasons for his being an interesting person to follow. I am now about to set him in a certain situation and set moving a certain sequence of events. Because the chief actor is the sort of man I have shown him to be, he will react to his situation and to the problem he faces throughout the sequence of events consistently with this basic characteristic."

All actors, in so far as the short story is concerned, are governed by their basic characteristics. Thus, if Helen Blake is supremely selfish, she must not be shown performing generous deeds, because these would seem to belie the character claimed for her. But more important than this negative restriction, she must be shown *only* in scenes wherein her acts depend to some degree upon her selfishness. For Helen Blake is a selfish woman. The reader has been told so in the first paragraph. Part of the author's task is to offer continual proof of her selfishness; the other part is to show that her selfishness governs her reactions to the persons

and situations with which she comes into contact until — at the climax of the story — her decision to solve the problem with which she is faced will be motivated by her basic characteristic—selfishness. Therefore, he chooses only those scenes in which her selfishness may be exhibited.

All of this leads back once more to the homesteaders on the subdivision cut up from John Appleby's back forty. None of these people would furnish interest to magazine readers at any random point in their lives. The short-story writer must seek them out only at crucial points. Admitting their general unadaptability as the protagonists of a good story, he heightens, by contrast, their availability as fiction material at the precise point he chooses to pick them up. The author says, in effect: "Here is John Smith who, with his wife and two children, lives on Pinecrest Avenue. John's life is usually quite as uneventful as yours or mine. But just at this point something of real interest happened to John. That is my excuse for dragging him out of his complacent obscurity and telling you about him."

The reader's curiosity is sufficient to fix his interest upon John Smith until the author has a chance to strengthen his hold by supplying details of the original situation. But his first move in that direction is to introduce the basic characteristic. John is a humdrum, ordinary

sort of fellow, but he has one dominant passion — the curious survival of a boyhood fondness for collecting stamps. One day he answers an advertisement for some issues which he lacks and finds — but that's the story.

And so the story of John Smith, ordinary citizen of an ordinary town, is suggested from the first paragraph, just as was the story of selfish Helen Blake. For this is the method which the modern short story employs to place its reader as quickly and as painlessly as possible in possession of the facts which he must know in order to understand the story. The chief actor who faces a crisis and the basic characteristic which governs his reactions to the crisis are presented immediately. Out of the chief actor himself arises the theme of the story. The necessity of introducing immediately chief actor, basic characteristic, and theme are inherent in the X-ray method, since the short story shows the chief actor facing a crisis in his life, passing through various episodes which show his attempts to solve the problem it presents, and finally solving it or being beaten by it. For this, it should be emphasized again, *is* the story and the only story which the author has set out to tell.

With such a method, the ending is foreshadowed from the beginning. Not that the author should allow his reader to guess what the ending will be for this would destroy all sus-



pense and the pleasure of approaching the dénouement through an interwoven series of unknown episodes. But just as each episode of the story will give the chief actor opportunity to demonstrate the way in which his basic characteristic shapes and governs his reactions, so the story's ending will arise from the effect of this basic characteristic upon the chief actor's decision. The ending of the detective's story mentioned above, is shaped by the chief actor's procedure of deduction rather than personal investigation. When a story is finished, the reader, had he a mind to analyze it, should find that the chief actor had reacted in every episode consistently with the sort of man the author had shown him to be in the first paragraph. From first paragraph to last, he remained the same type of person; his reactions were shaped by his basic characteristic.

Now this does not mean that the chief actor must initiate every situation and every episode of the story. It only illustrates more clearly that the story is the chief actor's alone, and that the focus of interest is always upon his struggle, the focus of action always through his consciousness. There are minor actors who play their important parts and they, quite as often as the chief actor, project the action of the scenes. But in every case it is through the consciousness of the chief actor that the story's stream of action flows.

For example, Chief Actor John Smith is walking down the street one evening, in his pocket an envelope containing half a dozen stamps which he considers of no great value. Out from behind a tree in the shadowy space between two arc lights steps a man with a gun. John obediently puts up his hands, and the stranger goes through his pockets, finds the envelope with the stamps, emits a grunt of satisfaction, and bolts down the street, leaving John both astounded and puzzled. His watch and his money have been ignored. Only those few almost worthless stamps were taken. John ponders the situation and decides that there must have been something of peculiar value about them to make a man hold him up at the point of a gun when he might have bought them for a few dollars.

Obviously, this is not a situation which John Smith motivates. Its impetus has come from a minor actor who forced John to take some particular action. Still, the unity of focus has been in no way violated. The reader walked briskly down the street with John, suffered his sudden fright at looking down the barrel of a businesslike pistol, felt equal curiosity with him about the theft of the supposedly commonplace stamps. The thief disappears down the street after motivating his scene; the reader remains under the tree with John Smith, wondering what there could have been about those stamps.

Similarly, at the story's ending the chief actor may be conquered by a minor actor, or even by Fate, but the unity of focus is never violated, nor are the chief actor's reactions governed other than by the basic characteristic. John Smith moves from episode to episode, reacting to minor actors or circumstances, or being reacted upon by them, but always these reactions are shaped by the basic characteristic which the author has shown to be the governing force of the story.

Here, then, is the short story thus far: It concerns a chief actor whose consciousness becomes the focus upon which the reader's interest is fixed as well as the focus through which the stream of action flows. This chief actor is possessed of a basic characteristic—a pronounced sense of duty, selfishness, awkwardness, bashfulness, a passion for stamp collecting; the basic characteristic governs his reactions to the minor actors of the story and to the various situations in which the episodes place him, for the author chooses only those episodes which will reveal the basic characteristic in action. The theme of the story rises out of the chief actor. The theme is shown to be an interesting one only because the chief actor is interesting at the particular time the story opens. Chief actor, basic characteristic, and theme are suggested as early as possible, preferably in the first paragraph.



In brief, the short story is not unlike the proof of a proposition in geometry. At the beginning it states a theorem: Chief Actor John Smith, because of his passion for collecting stamps, passed through a curious chain of episodes which I, the author, am about to reveal. Because of his basic characteristic, his reactions to the situation in which the episodes place him will be governed by this same interest in stamps. The various episodes themselves constitute the proof of the theorem. If, throughout these episodes, there has been no deviation from the proof which the theorem requires, then the author, quite as soundly as the geometrician, may write *Q.E.D.* at the end. For he has chosen a theme which has both a beginning and an ending, a problem which his chief actor *can* solve. When the solution has been demonstrated, and the story told which his first paragraph suggested, the author has reached a definite conclusion: there is no more to tell. The theorem is proved. Instead of the novelist's "*Finis*," the short-story writer subscribes, "*Quod erat demonstrandum*."

#### ILLUSTRATIVE SUGGESTIONS

1. Following the plan suggested at the end of Chapter I, these questions will test the reader's grasp of the development in Chapter II:

- a. What is meant by the *crucial situation* faced by the chief actor at the beginning of the story?

Wherein does this aid in focusing the reader's attention immediately upon the chief actor?

- b. What is meant by the statement that the short story must have a definite ending as well as a beginning? How is this requirement connected with the crucial situation?
- c. What is meant by the *basic characteristic* of the chief actor? How does its introduction serve to gain the reader's attention?
- d. Why are stories unconvincing which depend upon changes in character?
- e. What is the *theme* of a story? Be ready, after reading the next chapter, to distinguish it from *plot*.

2. Analyze at least three magazine short stories to determine just why they may be said to possess both a beginning and an ending. Find a story whose ending does not convince you and determine whether this deficiency is due to the theme itself — to the fact that a convincing solution of the chief actor's problem is impossible. Try to alter the problem in such a way that a solution will be possible.

3. Invent a number of simple situations possessing problems which may be solved convincingly. Try also to invent situations with chief actors whose problems could not be solved within the limits of a short story. Analyze each type to make sure that you understand why, in the first case, the situation is proper for short story treatment and why, in the second, it should be developed in some other fiction form, if at all.

## CHAPTER III

### BEGINNING THE STORY

WHEN a writer contemplates the construction of a short story, his first thought is to gather the *fiction materials*. The term includes actors, setting, problem, episodes, climax, dénouement — all of the various essentials which, moved into their proper places, compose the *plot* of the short story, and, translated into dramatic narrative, furnish the finished product. Fiction materials may be compared to the block of marble from which the sculptor chisels his idea into life. In a short story, materials include everything which will find its way into the finished narrative — and a great deal which will not. An examination of this subject suggests the importance not only of gathering sufficient materials, but of sorting from the mass those necessary factors which should be found in the finished product.

Since the short story deals only with a crucial situation in the life of its chief actor, it is apparent that it in no sense gives a complete picture of his life. It picks out a day, a week, or a month during which the chief actor faced a problem and solved it. The story is not concerned with the years or the days before this particular crucial situation presented itself; it



is not concerned with those which follow the problem's solution. Yet if the author is to give his reader a vivid, convincing impression not only of the chief actor but of the minor actors as well, *he* must know something about their lives outside the scope of the story. His own information is not bounded by the narrow time limits of his short story. It extends back a year and more before the first paragraph introduces the chief actor; it looks forward somewhat into the future. It includes scenes not properly a part of the story because they either precede the chief actor's realization of his crucial situation, or place themselves after its solution.

Perhaps all the action in the finished short story takes place during the chief actor's summer vacation in the Maine woods. The setting never leaves that general locality. But the author knows the chief actor's home back in Buffalo, New York. He has an idea of the environment, he knows the family. All of this is part of the understanding he *must* have of his actors if he is to present them lifelike to his reader. Yet in all probability much of these materials will never find its way into the story proper. Just how important knowing one's actors and their background may be will appear in later chapters. For the present, it is sufficient to say that the more an author learns of them before he begins to write the more

certainly that he will translate to his reader the impression he desires to give.

This impression must be made quickly and with sharp definition because of the limited space at the author's command. One of the primary necessities of short-story writing, therefore, is *clarity*. A moment's consideration of this fiction form in terms of the theater illustrates the necessity of keeping the actors, the stream of action, and the situation constantly clear to the reader. The curtain of a theater rises to disclose a setting and actors. The audience takes in the setting at a glance and has an important key to the time and place of the play. The actors — before they speak a line — aid materially this entirely visual impression. Even the program which the playgoer peruses before the lights are dimmed puts him in possession of important clues to the character of the piece he is about to watch. But the short-story writer has none of these important props to his art. He must depend upon words alone to build his sets, create his actors, and show their movements. Yet he, no less than the playwright, must furnish a stage with setting and actors. The curtain rises when the reader glances at the first paragraph. With quick, incisive strokes he must suggest his setting, introduce his actors, and make them move, until the reader sees them as clearly as though they were before him upon a stage. If

he fails, it is as though the reader were watching a stage obscured by too many curtains of gauze behind which men and women move in confused outline.

The relation which the reader bears to the story should be borne constantly in mind. For the reader may be as independent as he wishes. If the story fails to interest him at its beginning, he has only to turn the pages of his magazine to more arresting fiction. More important still is that first reader in the editorial office whose interest, unawakened, extends just far enough to reach for a rejection slip and put the return envelope with the outgoing mail. Yes, the reader's attention is something to be considered, and its first requisite is a clear picture. When the test of clarity is made, it must be based upon the average reader, approaching the story entirely ignorant of its actors and its theme.

The test of clarity is not difficult to apply if the author has his materials well in mind and a sufficient number of them to clarify things in his own mind. It requires a searching analysis of the actors themselves, in the first place, to make sure they are dramatized as vital, living individuals, their features as clear to the reader as though they were seen upon a stage. Following again the line toward greatest simplification, details of physical appearance, dress, manner, and condition should be selected to



bear out and strengthen the impression given by the basic characteristic. Suppose the chief actor to be that same selfish Helen Blake who was mentioned in the preceding chapter, and suppose the paragraph cited to be the first paragraph of her story. The author has now told the reader that she is selfish, that she is beautiful, that she has "devastating brown eyes." What else should the reader know in order to see her as a living person, distinct from other selfish women?

The question cannot be answered fully without writing the story, but it is possible to suggest at least the outline of the picture as it applies to all actors. The brown eyes suggest a brunette. Perhaps she has heavy black hair, bobbed and rippling back prettily from her forehead; perhaps she is tall and carries herself in a way calculated to make men turn about for a second glance when they pass her on the street; perhaps she is addicted to wide-brimmed hats, and gowns whose lines serve to accentuate her figure rather than conceal it. How does she speak? Sharply, perhaps, with a trace of annoyance in her voice as though she were constantly a trifle irritated over something — she doesn't exactly know what. Where does she live? In a great house in the suburbs of New York, Philadelphia, Chicago? Or in an apartment in one of those cities? Or in a home of moderate means in any of a hundred-odd

cities of fifty thousand or so scattered from Maine to California?

These or similar details are matters of importance to the reader. They are necessary bits of information which help him to see Helen Blake and understand her. The program in the theater informs the audience that the scene of Act I is laid in the library of the home of John Blake on Long Island. The reader of Helen Blake's story in a magazine has a right to know, too, that her father's home is on Long Island. Helen Blake upon the stage of a theater makes her own impression upon the audience before she speaks a line. Helen Blake in the short story must also make her impression, and those details which the theater audience sees must be suggested by the author of the short story.

Just how much should be conveyed depends, of course, upon the short story itself. The reader's impression of the chief actor is greatly simplified by the immediate introduction of the basic characteristic, and that should serve as the foundation upon which to build the necessary outline. In Helen Blake's case, as many of the personal details as possible should accentuate her selfishness. Thus, she might have a rather hard look about her eyes, and the irritation in her voice would help. Making her the daughter of wealthy parents would suggest a girl accustomed to everything she desired and

hence intent upon her own wishes. Making her an only child would further serve to emphasize the impression. Every detail should be picked carefully to play its part in the cumulative impression.

The *setting* of a story is the background against which the actors move. The community in which they live is a part of it as are the streets they travel, their homes, even the time at which the scene is laid — the present, 1915, the nineties, the fifties. But primarily it is the general background of the story. Just how much detail of setting should be given depends again upon the particular story. Sometimes the setting itself has an important effect upon the story. If, for example, the scene is laid in the Arctic where the bitter cold unnerves the chief actor and causes him to react significantly, then it is important to stress the setting in order to make the reader certain that the chief actor's reactions are justified, or at least understandable. But, conversely, if the setting is a town not greatly different from any one of a thousand other towns and it has no particular part to play in the story, then the author need indicate no more than the fact, with perhaps a general suggestion that the town is in the South, in New England, in the Middle West, or in a certain State.

The particulars of a setting should likewise be stressed or not, depending upon the part



they play in the story. Thus, if a particular room has a significant effect upon the chief actor, places him in a mood important to the story, then it is necessary to describe the room sufficiently to make the reader understand the emotion aroused in the chief actor. But if the room is of no importance to the story's movement, then a swift detail or two will suffice to fix a general outline which the reader may fill in according to his own taste. If the setting is not significant and has no effect upon the action, then the author's only consideration need be to give a detail here and there which will fix the outline.

All this is a necessary consideration in the test of clarity, for all of it is requisite to the reader's understanding of the actors and the general background against which they move. Once all these matters are clearly fixed in the author's mind, it is not such a difficult matter to transfer them to paper. The tests may then be applied in a series of interrogatory sentences, the answers lying in the story itself: "Have I made my chief actor so clear that the reader will see him and understand him? Have I made the background clear? Are my actors walking in space rather than upon streets or in the rooms of particular houses? Does the reader, knowing nothing about my chief actor and minor actors, gain the same impression of them which I have and wish to transfer to

him?" If the story gives affirmative answers, then the author has been successful in this part of his task.

There is another consideration of the story's beginning which is equally important: placing the chief actor in his situation, faced with the problem which he is to solve. This may be called *stating the original situation*. Going back, for illustration, to the simple plot outlined in the first chapter of the clerk who is in love with his employer's daughter, what are the details which must be given the reader in order that he may understand not only that the chief actor is a clerk, poor and possessed of a certain basic characteristic, but the situation in which he finds himself? First, the reader must be informed that the clerk is in love with the employer's daughter and that his poverty, coupled with her apparent ignorance of his existence, makes his suit fairly hopeless. Second, the reader must be placed in possession of ameliorating factors which suggest that, despite the overwhelming odds against him, the clerk may have a chance, through circumstances which have just arisen, to meet the girl and possibly make an impression upon her. The entire situation is sketched in as rapidly as possible in order that the reader may be in a position to understand the theme of the story. It is quite as important to convey a proper statement of the original situation as it is to picture the

chief actor or the setting. Without it, the reader can neither understand nor enjoy the story. Add, then, another question for the author to ask of his story: "Does it make clear the original situation and the problem of my chief actor?"

All of these details taken together make up the *exposition* of the story. When the second and succeeding instalments of serialized novels appear in the magazines, they are accompanied by a "Synopsis of Preceding Chapters." This brief summary of the action which has already taken place puts the reader in possession of facts necessary for an understanding of the story as he picks it up. Just so, the *exposition* of a short story places the reader in possession of facts which are essential to his understanding of the chief actor and the situation in which he finds himself. The author must judge how much of the *materials* he has collected should be given to the reader as exposition rather than as direct action in the story. And the test which he uses is again the test of clarity. "How much of all that I know about my chief actor," he asks himself, "should be conveyed to the reader so that he will understand the chief actor as I understand him?" The answer to the question satisfies the problem of exposition.

All of this leads directly to the author's question: "How shall I begin my story?"



A short story's beginning — that is, its first few paragraphs — should attempt: 1. To gain the interest of the reader immediately for the theme of the story. 2. To fix this interest upon a chief actor, appealing because of his basic characteristic, who faces a problem sufficiently arresting to arouse the reader's curiosity. 3. To introduce the exposition so that the reader, familiar with actors and setting, is in a position to lean back in his chair and watch the actors moving against a background which is clear to him. 4. To start the narration just as the crucial situation presents itself, or is about to present itself, to the chief actor.

What, then, should the first paragraph contain? If possible, the immediate introduction of the chief actor and his basic characteristic with a suggestion of the story's setting and the general theme. For example:

Robert Roberts III (with a discreet pause between the "Roberts" and the three I's to suggest properly Robert's complete realization of the responsibility placed upon his quite capable shoulders by the holders of numbers I and II) glanced from the racing-card in his hand to the horses in the paddock. Not that Robert III made any particular mental note in the movement of his eyes from card to horses. He didn't. For Robert, however he might attempt to appear interested in the crowd about him and the races themselves, was bored by it all. Robert was in a mood to welcome excitement, and without too great discrimination as to its source.

This method of opening a short story is by far the most simple and most effective, for it presents the reader immediately with a definite scene upon which to fix his eye, as well as a chief actor to single out in the paddock crowd as the particular focus of attention. Turn back for a moment to the introductory paragraph of Helen Blake's story in the last chapter. There the chief actor is introduced and the basic characteristic presented, but there is no scene upon which the curtain is raised. The author introduces Helen Blake and her basic characteristic, but he does not fix her in a scene which the reader may visualize. Either method is effective, but that used with Robert Roberts is the more successful because of its attention-fixing qualities.

The first paragraph of Robert's story has already made its bid for the reader's attention. It has suggested that almost immediately the chief actor's desire for excitement will in all probability be satisfied. In other words, the author has broken in upon Robert's life at a time when crisis is imminent. The introductory paragraph suggests that boredom is the chief actor's basic characteristic. Sketchily, to be sure, but none the less definitely, it suggests that Robert, impressed by his own importance as the son of Robert II and the grandson of Robert I, is usually very much bored with life, but that, as the author begins to turn the cam-

era's crank and Robert steps into focus, something is about to happen which will transform this boredom into a sudden interest in life.

The story's setting is obviously to be concerned in part or in whole with horse-racing. The first paragraph suggests it, and since the reader's interest is partially gained through this introduction of a definite setting which strikes something of a keynote, the author should not violate it by showing Robert in the next scene back in his rooms at home a day or two later with the races put entirely out of his mind. The first paragraph, more than any other, should serve to keynote the story. If Robert's relief from boredom is not to take place at the races, then the story should not open with the paddock scene, but should place its chief actor against a background which the reader is to keep in mind for the greater part of the story, or else a purely neutral one which will not impress itself too strongly upon him. This is an important consideration. Suppose Robert had been introduced as he walked along the indeterminate street of an indeterminate town. The reader's interest in that case would not have been attracted by the *emphasis* upon a particular background. But in this case, the very mention of the paddock emphasizes the setting because it suggests a definite atmosphere. Had Robert been introduced back stage in a theater, in the trenches during a



battle, at a baseball game, or in any other definite setting, it would have served to emphasize the background. Unless the setting of the first scene is chosen to keynote the story, care should be observed in the choice so that the danger of false emphasis is avoided.

Paragraph two is usually a continuation of the scene introduced in paragraph one. If possible, the arresting circumstance which is to mark Robert's relief from boredom should be brought in. If it seems more desirable to hold it in abeyance for the moment in order to fix the character of Robert more definitely, then paragraph two may be devoted to a simple continuation of paragraph one. But here a warning is necessary. Paragraph two often seems an ideal place for the author to step in for a moment and deliver himself of the exposition. Leaving Robert gazing about the paddock with a bored stare, he hurries the reader into a corner to explain Robert's situation, his background, his reason for being bored. Having relieved himself of these necessary details, he leads the reader back to Robert and retires hastily from the picture.

Now this is a sure way to pound home the exposition quickly and clearly — but it is not dramatic. More, it halts the action of the story. The reader, the author hopes, has already fixed his interest upon Robert Roberts III. Why, then, should this same tempera-

mental reader be dragged away from the object of his attention to absorb details which, to be sure, he must know, but which he would like to have given him as unobtrusively as possible? Obviously, this is the wrong method of introducing the exposition. How, then, should the author complete this necessary part of his task?

The most effective procedure is to insert the exposition piecemeal as the story moves along, slipping bits of it into the reader's consciousness with the sugar coating of action to disguise the dosing. After all, the author's picture of Robert himself will serve to take care of a great deal. The following paragraph illustrates the *wrong* development of paragraph two, thrusting the chief actor aside as the author leads the reader into a corner to explain the situation:

From his earliest recollection, boredom had been Robert's chief, almost his sole, emotion. The child of wealthy parents who had furnished him with tutors as a boy and kept him from the easy association of other children, he had grown up in a world which vibrated so rapidly between New York, White Sulphur, Palm Beach, Asheville, Europe, and back again to New York, that he had early adopted boredom as a sort of protective covering against such a confusing succession of contacts. Later, it became a habit. Work in his father's Wall Street office bored him, the girls his mother carefully chose as marriageable possibilities bored him — Robert was even becoming bored with himself. Horses offered the sole hope for the still unfamiliar emotion of enthusiasm.

Paragraph two, turned in this fashion, offers interesting detail, perhaps, but it definitely halts the action while the author pours it into the reader's ear. He has definitely fixed Robert in his own particular world, but in doing so, he has sacrificed the reader's focus upon Robert in the paddock, looking from racing-card to horses and wishing for all the world that something would happen. There is a better method of composing paragraph two — one which will not break the stream of action as does the example above. In it, the reader's interest remains focused where the first paragraph left it — upon the chief actor as he stands in the paddock. It does not convey so much of the exposition as does the less effective example, but it discloses patches here and there which furnish the reader with sufficient information to keep the picture clear.

After all, the piecemeal method of introducing exposition is far more natural, far more lifelike than the other, and it is the attempt of the short story always to reproduce the illusion of life. One does not meet a person, say "How do you do?" and then stand aside for a moment while he declaims a short biographical note. One gathers from conversation a detail here and there. As association continues one builds up a more definite impression. But omniscience does not descend in a lump. Just so, the exposition in a short story should be intro-



duced casually and easily, the reader building up his impression of the chief actor much as he would build it up while he talked with a new acquaintance upon the street. Usually there is an immediate and definite first impression; in the short story, the basic characteristic corresponds with this first impression. But the rest comes easily and naturally without explanatory notes. Paragraph two, then, merely continues the reader's acquaintance, still somewhat casual, with Robert and directs the stream of action into the significant channel of the story, in this case introducing the circumstance which is to relieve the young man's boredom.

Custom, he supposed, required that he place a bet or two. His bookie would be over by the second stairway of the grandstand, and Robert, remembering that this was a steeplechase, glanced again at his card before marshaling energy to push his way through the crowd. Most of the field were familiars, and as he ran a practiced eye down the names he reflected with something like increased boredom that his own hunter could have led the field against any of them. Wait a minute, though. The ninth entry was new. He glanced at the owner and read, "Miss Ann Bainbridge." The name had a familiar ring, but for the life of him he couldn't place it. Some one brushed his arm, and he lifted his hat without looking up. The murmured "Pardon me," caught his ear, and he glanced about quickly to see a trim figure hurrying toward the grandstand. Suddenly, an unusual thing happened. There was a

click in Robert's brain. The retreating figure had collided with another scene, two weeks before. He had been lunching at the Ritz with his mother and had glanced up somewhat wearily at the mater's greeting to catch just a glimpse of a trim figure retreating through the aisle of tables. There must have been something electric in that figure, reflected Robert. He was rotten at names, he knew. But certainly his mother had called her "Miss Bainbridge."

This development of the second paragraph demonstrates the proper method of continuing the stream of action set moving in the first paragraph without a disconcerting break for the introduction of detailed exposition. The reader has not gained a great deal more specific information about Robert, but the author has cut more deeply the impression of the chief actor as a wealthy young man, not particularly interested in anything but horses, repeating an afternoon at the races for want of something better to occupy his attention. Introduction of an important minor actor adds a further touch of interest and advances the action. It suggests the approach of that excitement which the reader has been told Robert desires, and so gives rise to the first bit of *suspense* on the reader's part. But the fact of primary importance is that the action of the story which began with the first sentence has not been halted nor its focus shifted. The spotlight is still cast upon Robert, his movements, and

his thoughts. Succeeding paragraphs of the story's beginning merely continue the flow of action. With no uncomfortable halts for explanation it moves forward, dropping hints here and there the sum of which is an unobtrusive introduction of the exposition. At no time has the author been forced to interrupt his reader's absorption in the advancing narrative by obviously calling his attention to details. This, then, is the primary necessity of short-story development: That it shall be a succession of paragraphs with a continuous flow of narrative from first paragraph to last.

### ILLUSTRATIVE SUGGESTIONS

1. In general what details concerning the chief actor should be included in the beginning of a story in order to fix a picture of him in the reader's mind?

2. With the following suggested characters, choose a basic characteristic for each and then note down as many details as possible which would serve to emphasize this characteristic and sharpen the reader's impression of the actor himself: (*a*) a banker of fifty; (*b*) a traveling salesman of thirty-five; (*c*) a college girl of twenty; (*d*) a grocery clerk in a small town; (*e*) a wealthy woman of sixty; (*f*) a middle-aged attorney.

3. Examine the introductory paragraphs of half a dozen magazine short stories and compare them with the typical paragraphs cited in this chapter and in Chapter II. Do they follow the same method of attack? If not, wherein do they differ? Recast those which fail to conform in accordance



with the formulas stated in these two chapters and decide which method is the more effective.

4. Examine the first few paragraphs of the two stories in this book and note down all of the character details which you can find. Wherein do these bear directly upon the basic characteristic? How do they serve to clarify quickly your impression of the chief actor? Perform the same exercise with other stories taken from magazines.

5. The beginning of a story is particularly important from a practical point of view since if it fails to impress the reader he will hardly find his way to what may be more interesting material later on. Therefore, introductions should be studied carefully not only with a view to determining what should be included, but to noting what should be omitted. Find three stories whose beginnings strike you as ineffective. Try to establish the reason for their failure and see whether, by rewriting and including details which the author has omitted, you can improve his work.

6. Make your own list of the general character detail for the chief actor which you feel each short story should contain and test magazine story beginnings by it.

7. Analyze three stories in which *setting* is stressed. What has the author gained by his emphasis? What effect would have been lost had he failed to impress his setting upon his readers?

8. Compare the three stories in which setting is stressed with three in which it is not. Note the comparative attention which the authors of both types have given to setting and then make a list, similar to the character detail list, of setting-details

which you feel should be included in any story whose setting is not to be stressed. (Such a list obviously could not be made for the story of important setting since no generalized list could be made to cover the individual requirements of all stories of setting.)

9. Write three beginnings of your own, practicing particularly the device of inserting bits of exposition without stopping the narrative flow.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONSTRUCTION

DISCUSSION of a short story's beginning leads naturally to the question: Where does the beginning end? To answer the query requires some consideration of the story's structural parts. Again the analogy of the theater serves for, as the play is divided usually into three acts, so the short story separates itself into three fairly distinct divisions: the beginning, the body, and the ending. An understanding of these three structural units makes more simple the process of developing the short story's action.

In a play, the division is made obvious by the mechanical contrivance of a curtain. Nothing so positively defined may be claimed for the short story, but a division into parts is none the less discernible. In remembering it the writer simplifies his own work of construction as well as the sometimes even more important task of revision later on.

The beginning performs the following functions: 1. It introduces the chief actor as well as the basic characteristic upon which the story turns. 2. It contains all of the exposition which is necessary for the reader's understanding of the chief actor's character, his



situation, and the setting of the story. 3. It suggests the theme. 4. It faces the chief actor with the problem whose solution is responsible for the story's action. 5. Not always, but usually, it introduces one or more of the minor actors.

Each of these functions has been dealt with particularly in preceding chapters. But how is the author to know the actual point at which the beginning ends and the action shifts over into the body of the story?

Every short story divides itself into *scenes*. Each time the actors move from one specific background to another — from one room to another — a new scene begins. The beginning itself usually occupies but a single scene. No definite ruling may be made, for sometimes two or even three scenes are necessary before the body of the story is reached. But let us say, for example, that a single scene will serve to contain the beginning. Take as an illustration the story of Robert Roberts III. Suppose that Robert suddenly awakes from his boredom to the realization that Ann Bainbridge holds a considerable fascination for him. He has always wanted to marry a girl whose interest, like his own, was in horses. He sees the girl of his choice in Ann. His problem becomes one of meeting her and winning her. In the first two paragraphs the author has introduced Robert and given the reader a fleeting glimpse

of Ann. The beginning should carry Robert to the realization that his problem's solution will require definite action upon his part. As the solution begins with the first specific steps, there the beginning ends.

All of that may seem somewhat involved. Stated in general terms it becomes more simple. The beginning introduces the chief actor and his basic characteristic. It presents him with a problem whose solution is to be influenced by his basic characteristic. It gives the exposition. It places the reader in possession of the necessary facts regarding the chief actor's situation, and it gives him the theme of the story. It has introduced the chief actor at a crisis in his life. It shows the chief actor realizing that the crisis is at hand. What shall he do about it? Finally, he realizes that the crisis will never be overcome unless he takes steps to solve the problem which it presents, and some ameliorating circumstance presents itself which seems to offer a way out. And at just this point the beginning is over. The reader, with the exposition in mind, is ready to watch the chief actor as he makes his first moves toward the problem's solution. To state it in terms of the reader's reaction: "Yes, I know who the chief actor is and all about the problem he is facing. I understand the situation perfectly. Now I want to see what the chief actor does about it."

An analysis of the second part, or *body*, of the short story discloses that it contains the various scenes in which the chief actor approaches the actual solution of his problem. In the case of Robert Roberts, all of these scenes should lead toward his obtaining Ann's consent to marry him or to her final rejection of him. For Robert's problem has been defined as just that: the conquest of Ann Bainbridge. Once he wins her consent to marry him the problem will be solved and the story will be finished. The story itself, then, is concerned with his tactical maneuvers to arouse a reciprocal feeling in Ann, complicated, no doubt, by the indecision which his boredom induces. Through the body of the story the author leads him in a series of adventures directed always toward his goal which will be won or lost in the third part, or *ending*, of the story.

Usually the end of the *body* may be set without great difficulty, for its most natural ending is at the *climax* of the short story. Since the climax has not been dealt with hitherto, it may be well to define it somewhat carefully here. It is, of course, fairly obvious that the climax is a story's highest point of interest. From this, however, it is not correct to deduce that the climax is also the story's most exciting scene — a rescue from a burning building, the capture of a desperado at the end of a thrilling



exchange of shots, the moment the Colonel's daughter rides Black Beauty across the finish line to win the Derby and save the old home. A reëxamination of the logical story sequence serves to show the exact nature of the climax.

Briefly, the short story presents a chief actor at a crucial moment in his life. A problem faces him which he must solve. Carefully, the author focuses the interest upon his chief actor and sets up a question in the reader's mind: "Will the chief actor be able to solve his problem and gain the goal he seeks?" The entire interest is focused upon this chief actor and *not* upon the events themselves which make up the action of the story. However interesting they may be, the author holds the reader's attention upon the figure of the chief actor as he makes the various moves which he hopes will solve his problem. During all these moves, the chief actor is realizing more and more acutely the necessity of solving his problem. Inevitably he approaches the point at which he must make the move which will mean victory or defeat. He revolves the matter in his mind and finally reaches his decision. He *will* make the supreme effort. This is the *climax* of the story.

After it follows the attempt itself which may be thrilling, far more absorbing, so it may often seem to the reader, than the actual moment of decision. But it is at the decision that the climax really comes, for it is just there that the

reader's interest reaches its highest pitch. Through the story the reader is asking: "Will the chief actor be able to solve his problem?" But he is asking, too, "Will he take the steps necessary to the problem's solution?" And at this point when the chief actor wavers between deciding whether to take the deciding step, the highest point of concentration arrives. "Will he do it?" asks the reader, engrossed. And when the decision comes, there is a sigh of relief, a momentary lowering of the curtain. Just here the body of the story ends.

Now these two structural divisions — after the beginning and after the body of the story — are convenient aids in construction. They simplify the stretch of the short story from first paragraph to last, enable the writer to check up on himself and decide whether within these two parts he has taken advantage of every opportunity to make his story interesting and dramatic. Upon their careful construction depends the effectiveness of the *ending*.

It seems rather absurd to repeat the question asked with relation to the other two parts: "Where does the ending end?" But it is important to note just what the ending should contain and, as a matter of fact, it is not entirely absurd to observe the logical concluding point. When that brief curtain which was lowered at the end of the body of the story

rises once more, it is to disclose the chief actor started upon his way toward the final and definite solution of his problem. He has passed his climax; he has taken matters into his own hands. The ending, then, shows the solution itself and its effect upon the chief actor as well as upon the minor actors. The solution, and more properly what follows, constitute the *dénouement*.

The *dénouement* is literally the unraveling of the story threads. At the short story's close it may not be assumed by the reader that all of the actors will live happily ever after, but the reader must not wonder whether they are, after all, settled in life. Thus, as the short story should never deal with a problem for which there is not a definite solution, so minor actors should not be introduced who cannot be disposed of satisfactorily at the close. Nor must minor situations and minor mysteries be left unresolved. When the story is finished the reader must never ask: "Whatever became of the chief actor's sister who started out to Los Angeles toward the middle of the story and is never mentioned again?" Or, "What was in that letter which caused one of the minor actors to develop such a case of nerves?" Everything must be wound up at the story's close. There must be no loose ends. When the curtain is rung down and the reader lays his magazine on the table it must be with a sense



of fulfillment. The problem has been solved.  
*Q.E.D.*

### ILLUSTRATIVE SUGGESTIONS

1. An understanding of the structural divisions of a short story is the most practical aid to plot building since it enables the writer to check his performance at three distinct points. Study the structural parts of the two stories analyzed at the end of the text until you are sure that you understand just what has been accomplished in each. In the Illustrative Suggestions following Chapter V a more complete method of analysis is suggested. Before reading the chapter on Building the Plot, however, it will be well to examine a number of short stories, dividing each into its structural parts, and learning to recognize the action scheme of each part.

2. Notice the technical device of introducing in the beginning what is termed the *ameliorating circumstance* to suggest that while the chief actor's problem is a difficult one indeed, there may be a way out. This is treated at greater length in Chapter V. Examine a number of stories to pick out the ameliorating circumstance.

3. Estimate approximately the proportions of the whole given over to the three structural parts in the stories which you read. While these proportions will be found to vary greatly with different stories, a study of them will assist in giving the writer at least a general check upon the amount of material he should include in each section. It is as dangerous to include too much material as too little. Analysis tends to cure the dangerous tendency toward *padding* — including unnecessary detail and scenes — by showing up the material which is really superfluous.

## CHAPTER V

### BUILDING THE PLOT

LIKE the scenario of a motion picture, the plot of a short story is the diagram or plan of its action. It is the blueprint from which the short story is to be built — the cold arrangement of materials in their proper order, ready for the elixir of dramatic narrative which is to infuse them with life. If there were an easy road to success in short-story writing, one might pause here to remark that the complete construction of a plot before ever the writing of the story was begun is the perfect formula. But there is no easy road to short-story success, and if every good short story waited upon the previous construction of a complete plot, many of them would go unwritten. Then, perhaps, we should have our “mute, inglorious Miltons” as now we have none. But though it is too much to expect that every writer will find it possible to construct his plot complete in every detail before he begins to write, this much may be said: the preconstruction of a suggestive if not a complete plot greatly simplifies the task of building a logical, interesting story.

The truth of this lies in a rather universal failing of human nature in so far as it injects

itself into writing. Few fiction-producing minds think logically from first paragraph to last of a short story without some fairly accurate scheme of action previously prepared. The heat of composition, creating, inspiration — call it what you will — does not lend itself to logical processes. The story rapidly worked through without advance planning is all too apt to go astray from its original theorem. It may have interesting scenes, may develop interesting business for its actors, but it becomes diffuse, it wanders, and, however engrossing it may be in parts, the general effect is lacking because the stream of action has been diverted from the chief actor's solution of his problem. The story fails to *click*.

The preparation of a plot — of a scene plan with suggested action over which to stretch the drama — is the surest method of overcoming the inevitable diffuseness of creative writing unguided by some such diagram. It is not a simple talent to develop, but once the habit is formed, writing itself is not only made easier, but the thought processes of creating become more logical. Like the current apologia for studying Latin and mathematics in the schools, plot building is excellent training for the mind; but unlike the usual feeling of the recalcitrant student with Latin and mathematics, training in plot lies in the direction the short-story writer wishes to take.



How does one approach the construction of a plot? The first consideration, obviously, is to gather all of the *materials* which the author expects to use in the fashioning of his story. The second is to analyze their dramatic possibilities and select the chief actor from the two or three who have presented themselves as possible choices for the rôle. The third is to decide upon the episodes which will best show the chief actor attempting to solve his problem in accordance with the basic characteristic. The fourth is to select the climactic situation and the ending. The fifth is the division of the story into scenes with an indication of the action which shall take place in each.

But before launching into a discussion of the best way to develop all of these elements it is necessary to consider a very real barrier. It is a rare short-story idea indeed which presents itself to the author in sufficient detail to admit of immediate separation into its component parts. Gleaning ideas from the harvest of life is a peculiarly individual process, and the only rule which may be developed is the axiom that usually the gleanings are in very small pieces.

"Bogus 'Prince' Admits Mulcting Wealthy of Thousands," the traveler reads in his neighbor's newspaper on the way to the country, and the germ of a short story is isolated. From the seat behind, bits of conversation impress themselves: "Sure, he likes me. D'you think

he'd ask me to go out with him if he didn't? . . . I don't care if you did see him with another girl. No man's going to make me jealous"; and another idea presents itself. Or it may be that the life of an acquaintance suggests the outline of a potential narrative. A man on the street furnishes a chief actor; a well-known advertising slogan suggests a title. Stories, one might say, are everywhere, but few of them come ready made.

How, then, to utilize chance suggestions? How to build from them workable short-story plots? Suppose, for example, that the bogus "prince" of the headline impresses the author's fancy. "Bogus 'Prince' Admits Mulcting Wealthy of Thousands." That is the plot germ. In this case, the plot germ consists of an actor and the bare surmise that an actor who is also a bogus prince should have fiction possibilities. The author's problem consists in expanding the materials sufficiently so that they may be molded into the dramatic narrative of a short story. How shall he go about it?

The most logical point of departure is obviously the actor. What sort of person does he become in the author's imagination? Is he to be a suave fellow of indeterminate race, a clever criminal of the most intelligent type who employs his graces and his knowledge of the world to prey upon the weakness of wealthy old

ladies for ensnaring "lions"? Is he a rather naïf young lad, wrongly accused of masking under an assumed title? In short, what sort of man is this actor to become?

Much might be said here in the nature of a warning against too close adherence to the first suggestion of a plot germ. The headline which furnished the story idea indicates a man, masking as a prince, who has extracted considerable sums from the pockets of wealthy persons under false pretenses. For some still unexplained reason the tendency of the young writer setting out to take advantage of this suggestion is to build his plot in strict conformity with the first impression his mind receives. If the "bogus prince" appears as a hardened criminal, then he can imagine no other character; if the "prince" first shows himself in a more benevolent light, then he is equally helpless to consider the actor differently.

Now the fact is, of course, that the author can make of his actor anything he wishes — can even discard him altogether, if he chooses, in favor of some other actor suggested by the material as it develops in his mind. This is all too frequently ignored. The particular newspaper headline in question places a somewhat malevolent air about the prince; the inexperienced writer is almost certain to seat himself at his typewriter and start his actor upon a



career of gentlemanly crime without a thought as to whether the best story possibilities of the prince lie in contributing to the crime wave or in some other field which might lend itself to a more amusing or effective plan.

It is a wise author who knows his own chief actor, and the author's first concern, faced with the actor in question, should be to determine whether he is proper material for a chief actor, or whether a different actor might not more effectively play the leading rôle. It is the part of wisdom to reserve this decision until the direction of the action is fixed, at least tentatively, in mind. This can hardly be done until the author has decided upon the sort of character his actor is to possess.

Thinking out the story, the first question which poses itself is: "In what situation might a bogus prince find himself which would offer fiction possibilities?" That question must be answered before the story can progress. Nor can the identity of the chief actor be determined before it is well in mind. It is possible — if not entirely wise — to proceed from an original situation, letting the story unfold itself in the author's imagination as he proceeds. But there must be a starting point — an interesting situation and a problem for the chief actor to face — before the action can be given its direction. With this original situation in mind, the selection of the chief actor

becomes the immediate consideration. The story cannot get under way until his identity is fixed, for without him there is no focus — no definite *story* upon which to rivet the reader's attention. Choice of the chief actor is succeeded by a determination of the problem whose solution is to prove the story itself. With all of this finally set, the author is ready to launch upon the further arrangement of his materials. In other words, he is ready to construct his plot.

The plot, it may be well to repeat, is the diagram of the short story's action. Reduced to its simplest essentials, it is the story in outline. Elaborated somewhat, it briefs the action which takes place in the three structural divisions: beginning, body, and ending. Elaborated still further, it divides each of these parts into its component scenes, with a bare statement of the actual business which takes place in each. Completed, it is the scenario of the short story, still devoid of the dramatic narration which will make the background real and the actors living people cast against it.

Narrative creation is so obviously an individual effort that no book or person can dictate the method to be followed in approaching it. But the following discussion shows the most logical and helpful scheme of developing the usually meager materials which present themselves originally as the plot germ into the

three-dimensional short story, possessed of background, actors, and action.

The four primary essentials — chief actor, basic characteristic, original situation, and problem — have already been pointed out. Until these are fixed in the author's mind, it is impossible to advance, simply because no starting point has been established. It may be valuable here to discuss further the tentative molding of these materials with the construction of the plot in mind. Stories of inexperienced writers, more often than not, are weak in the development of plot. Nine times out of ten, this weakness can be traced directly to the author's failure to visualize and fix the problem of his chief actor. An interesting chain of events has suggested a story. He arranges the events in their natural order, shows the hero of his story — one can hardly call him a "chief actor" in such cases — moving through these scenes, and ends the story when the sequence of events is finished. The story may have highly dramatic material, it may have fiction potentialities of the most promising sort, but its effectiveness has been entirely missed because of the author's failure definitely to fix the focus of the story through a chief actor with a problem to solve. For it is through the uncertainty which arises in the reader's mind as to the chief actor's ability to solve his problem that *suspense* is aroused.



And without suspense, the most interesting story will fail utterly in the telling. It is through a careful outline of the plot, wringing from it the last drop of its dramatic interest, that suspense may be developed.

To return to the "bogus prince," the basic situation might appear thus: The "prince," who is a real prince indeed, though shorn of his titles, his lands, and his money by a government turned from monarchy to republic by revolution, has come to America in the hope of finding employment. Fortune evades him, and he finally finds himself in straitened circumstances. A chance meeting over a restaurant table brings him into touch with a promising man who tells him of wealthy oil lands in the Southwest for which he is selling stock. The prince, in a moment of confidence, tells of his past life, and the stranger, seeing rare possibilities in having a prince in his employ, offers to take him on as an assistant. The prince seizes the opportunity eagerly. Now all of this might be developed as the original situation of the story, presupposing that the prince is to be the chief actor. But notice that in creating the original situation, the author has introduced another actor. The materials first comprehended in the plot germ have been enlarged by a second actor and by giving the prince a definite background. He is not now a "bogus" prince, but a real one,

deprived of his rank by official decree, perhaps, but still a prince. Likewise, in this tentative sorting of the materials, he is not a criminal, but a somewhat naïf young man, about to be employed by a stock promoter.

Pursuing this second actor for a moment, suppose him to be a dishonest fellow. One might visualize him as a disagreeable, conventionally criminal type, or one might make of him a "Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford" — an affable chap of easy morals who lives by his wits, but is possessed of a Robin Hood streak which removes some of the sting from his misdemeanors and arouses the sympathy of his audience. Obviously, he offers possibilities for interest. Perhaps, upon thinking the matter over, he might be a more plausible chief actor than the prince.

Perhaps he has a scheme whereby he is certain of making a killing if only he can approach the proper persons in the proper way. He has been shaking his head over it for a week when the chance meeting in a restaurant with the prince seems to solve his problem for him — the prince will be the contact man. Why not furnish him with the money for the sort of wardrobe he would need and launch him into society? It wouldn't be hard, he reflects. He could make it known that a prince of Ruritania is in the offing. The dowagers would be sure to take him up.

Here, obviously, is another candidate for the rôle of chief actor. In examining his possibilities, the author has taken an entirely new approach to the materials which originally included only the prince. And he has altered the prince's character entirely. Instead of dealing with a truly bogus prince, he has a real one. Instead of a criminal he has a pleasant fellow whose ingenuousness almost marks his undoing — almost, since the ending of such a story should surely extricate him unharmed from his exploit.

This is but a simple example of enlarging and juggling materials. Instead of taking the first approach which suggested itself, the author has considered the possibility of a new one which alters entirely his first point of view. In working over his materials to develop the original situation, he has found new leads which seem to offer better opportunities for a good story. Had he, instead of thinking things out a bit, plunged immediately into writing his story using the original approach, he might have missed entirely these new possibilities, or found out, after spending a considerable amount of time, that the original approach did not lead to interesting developments.

Suppose, then, that the author decides definitely to make the promoter — call him Montgomery — his chief actor. The next step in the enlargement of materials, working always toward the construction of the plot, is



the choice of a basic characteristic. What is Montgomery's basic characteristic? Suppose it is his rather uncanny ability to pick for his victims the proper elderly ladies with comfortable fortunes who will never suspect that the enterprises he so astutely presents have nothing behind them but the inventive skill of their promoter. He has never been caught at his schemes because no one ever investigates. He rarely works the same field twice, and when dividends are not forthcoming, his victims are satisfied with his own explanation that trickery by trusted employees has wiped out his own as well as their invested money. He promises prosecutions, but none ever develop. He lives upon the accuracy of this ability to choose his victims.

The problem which the chief actor faces is the next consideration. In the case under discussion, it has already been indicated. Montgomery has an excellent scheme afoot, but for one reason or another cannot present it properly to these same persons who, so his uncanny judgment — his basic characteristic — tells him, are the very ones to ensnare. Here is his problem, then: to find some means of presenting his scheme effectively to the proper persons, to gather in the profits, and to keep from running foul of the law.

The author now has in hand the four necessary elements with which to begin the actual

plotting of his scenes: chief actor, basic characteristic, original situation, and problem. Added to this, he has the most important minor actor, and the ameliorating circumstance in the person of the prince to assure the reader that, although the chief actor is in difficulty and faces a stiff problem, there is reason to believe that he may be able to solve it. The author is now ready to lay out the first scene — to consider what opening he will choose to ring up the curtain upon his actors.

At this point it should be remembered that the story introduces its chief actor at a crucial point. Not when he is *approaching* a crucial point — not a week or a day before it is at hand — but at a time when the crucial situation has impressed itself upon the chief actor's mind. It is there and he must face it. Montgomery should be introduced, therefore, not before his commendable scheme has presented itself to him, but at a time when its details are well fixed in his mind — when his only difficulty is to find some means of putting it into execution, and when discouragement has already impressed him with the feeling that it may be well-nigh impossible to work it out.

Now this is an important point which should not be dismissed with the stating of it, for in it lie the earliest possibilities for arousing *suspense* upon the part of the reader. That most necessary accomplice of the short-story writer's

art, the reader, should be impressed at the beginning of the story with the difficulty of this whole project. Montgomery is somewhat discouraged with it; it appears that the whole thing may fall to earth. But just then the prince is introduced. "I wonder," ponders the reader, "whether the prince may be drawn into the project and serve as the solution of Montgomery's problem." And after Montgomery has welcomed the young nobleman, thankful for any employment, the reader, his first question answered, has another to propound to himself: "Will the prince be able to sell Montgomery's stock without his very naïveté involving him in difficulties?" The second question is answered as the story progresses and its continuation in the reader's mind is part of the mechanics of suspense. In the next chapter, suspense will be analyzed in detail, but it is important to notice in passing this earliest snare to catch the interest of the reader by making him first doubtful of the chief actor's success, then given some hope, but still not entirely convinced. Suspense must be kept carefully alive from first to last paragraph. An analysis of those occasions when the reader guesses the ending long before the author intends that he should and therefore loses interest, shows that they arise from a failure to keep alive the reader's question. The author discloses too early, for example, that Montgomery's scheme will fall



through in the end, and the reader, his question answered, is unwilling to waste his time in learning something which he already knows.

Not infrequently the author must do some careful thinking in order to decide just where he should begin his story. But if he keeps the following rule in mind the choice will be made infinitely easier: The short story should begin at a point when the chief actor realizes that he faces a crucial situation with a problem which must be solved. The opening scene should introduce the chief actor just before ameliorating circumstances have presented themselves which make it seem that the problem may, after all, be solved if the chief actor will only take the steps suggested by the ameliorating circumstances.

In the case of Montgomery no great difficulty is encountered in choosing the first scene. A careless author might introduce his story with a scene in Montgomery's office which displayed the promoter worrying over his dilemma. But this, after all, would be superfluous. The restaurant is the proper place. For there the ameliorating circumstance is to present itself in the person of the prince. Nevertheless, the author should have in his mind the hour or two which Montgomery had spent in his office before seeking out the restaurant. He should know that Montgomery was worrying just as he had worried for the week since

his plan had perfected itself. The author should know something of the genesis of the scheme and something of Montgomery's previous escapades as well. Part of this must find its way into the beginning piecemeal as exposition. But no scene devoted exclusively to it is necessary. Such a scene would, in fact, be a mistake because it would be devoid of action and would open the narrative too far from the real beginning of the story which takes place when Montgomery is about to meet the prince who will aid in solving his problem.

This illustrates in a simple way the task of *selection*. When an author begins to mold his materials, he always finds himself with much interesting detail which is quite relevant to the story but still unnecessary to its understanding. By selection, he eliminates those details, scenes, even episodes which are not essential to the reader's understanding of the plot. As is the case with Montgomery, it might be quite possible to introduce a scene previous to the one which marks the true beginning. But that scene would not be necessary, and what is unnecessary is also harmful to the dramatic effect of the story for it decreases the reader's interest in the real story.

Montgomery's story also illustrates the beginning which should be completed in a single scene. Over the restaurant table conversation brings out the necessary details of the original

situation. The exposition is inserted; the problem is outlined; the direction of the action is indicated. When the two men are ready to leave the restaurant the reader has been placed in possession of all the facts which he needs to understand the action which is about to begin. Everything is in readiness for the prince and Montgomery to take the initial step toward solving the latter's problem. And there the beginning ends.

With the beginning mapped out, the author's next consideration should be the *climax* of the story. The reason for this is simple. In the beginning the stream of action has been given its direction but it has hardly been set moving toward the problem's solution, for that is the function of the body of the story. When the action begins to flow it must move toward a definite goal: the climax of the story. Scenes must be carefully built up to heighten the pitch of interest — to increase suspense — as the story moves forward. The reader must be led from scene to scene always watching the action through the focus of the chief actor, and always wondering, with the chief actor, whether a favorable or an unfavorable solution will be the reward. Through minor discouragements or success the reader follows the action to its climactic point when the chief actor must pass the supreme test and decide whether to take the final step which will mean solution of the



problem. Obviously, if the action is to lead toward this climax, the climax must be fixed in the author's mind before he can direct his action toward it. Its very determination in his mind will suggest some of the scenes leading up to it, so that when he begins planning his scenes to justify it, the author finds that building a logical and convincing framework is not a difficult task.

What is the climax of Montgomery's story? Suppose that the prince's efforts have not met with signal success. Despite Montgomery's coaching, the prince's vagueness upon details of the properties has led seemingly certain prospects to be wary. Montgomery is growing somewhat desperate. He has approached with the prince all of the sure-fire prospects upon his list and has met with a pleasant reception but few sales. Besides, he is having troubles with his prince who is ignorant of the fact that the stock is worthless. Finally the two of them meet an elderly woman who seems to Montgomery the answer to his prayers. The prince is doubtful, has grown somewhat restive under his constant lack of success and somewhat suspicious. He doubts flatly if anything can be done with the new prospect. But Montgomery is hard put to it. She seems, in his expert judgment, the perfect buyer. Besides, he must take the chance. He considers the prince's doubts, weighs them against his

own judgment and casts them aside. They will make the attempt.

This moment of decision the author chooses for the climax of his story. His task now is to retrace his steps over the body to develop scenes and action which will justify it. Justification of the climax goes back once more to the conception of the short story as the statement and proof of a proposition in geometry. With this analogy in mind, it is not difficult to visualize the scenes in the body of the story. The theorem states: Given a chief actor with a certain basic characteristic, he will act in a certain manner if placed in this particular situation. Now it is the function of the story to *prove* this proposition. It has been said somewhat loosely before that when the story is finished, the proof has been given. It has; but the actual point at which the proof ends is the climax of the story. What follows in the ending is the result of the chief actor's acting in a certain fashion at the climax. The actual *proof* of the proposition comes there. In the analysis of the story itself, the ending and its dénouement are more or less incidental. It is the climax toward which everything in the story leads.

The function of the body of the story, then, is *to show the basic characteristic in action*. Scenes must be chosen deliberately to display this basic characteristic and to convince the

reader that the chief actor does act in accordance with his basic characteristic. The solution of his problem is governed by it, as are his reactions to other characters and situations. The author's whole aim is to convince the reader that this basic characteristic is indeed the governing factor in the chief actor's life. This, it may be pointed out again, is one of the simplifications of the short story. It is not necessary, as in the novel, to give a fully rounded characterization of the various actors. In the short story the chief actor is a definite, fixed type of person, his every act governed by his basic characteristic.

The chosen scenes of a short story which lead to its climax should be planned as a sort of crescendo. The climax itself is the supreme test of the basic characteristic's influence upon the chief actor. Each of the preceding scenes likewise tests the basic characteristic in an ever-mounting degree which reaches its highest point at the climax. In the case of Montgomery, the first prospects of the prince are of the more simple type. Even though they do not purchase a great deal of the stock, they are favorably impressed; the pair is perfectly safe in approaching them. Montgomery has shrewdly sized them up as persons who will not suspect that anything is wrong with the stock which the prince offers them.

Thus, the author begins to force upon the



reader the conviction that Montgomery is, indeed, an exceedingly shrewd judge of persons. Just as the author had promised in the first paragraph or two, the promoter is able to size up his prospects and guess which of them may be safely approached and which should be avoided. Conviction grows upon the reader until, when the climax is reached, he is quite willing to admit that Montgomery's judgment is the governing factor in his life. Montgomery himself is not entirely sure of himself at this point; but the reader is willing to take a chance with him. And he is thoroughly convinced by this time—and that is the important part—that Montgomery's judgments are reached through his intuitive sizing up of the persons he meets.

All of this proof is a most necessary consideration of the author in choosing his scenes. It means that they are selected deliberately, not primarily because they afford opportunities for amusing, thrilling action, but because they prove the theorem which is the theme of the story. It indicates just why a story is something more than a sequence of episodes involving an interesting person in an interesting situation. It indicates the mechanics of short-story construction.

Not a great deal need be said about the ending. It is based upon the climax, of course, which, in turn, is governed by the basic char-

acteristic. The chief actor, his action decided by the basic characteristic, chooses a certain method of making the supreme attempt to solve his problem. He may succeed or he may fail: there are just two possibilities. In either case, the problem is solved; when he has succeeded or failed, therefore, the story ends because there is nothing more to be told. But the ending must grow out of the chief actor's decision at the climax. *He* must take the step toward its solution himself. He may be frustrated by a minor actor, by his situation, or by Fate. But he has done his best. He has acted in accordance with the impression given of him through the basic characteristic. If he fails, then he fails consistently with this picture. The important consideration is that the theorem has been demonstrated.

Looking back over the three parts of the short story, it seems unfortunate that no definite word can be given about the number of scenes necessary in each division. Usually the beginning can be completed in a single scene, and if no more are required, so much the better, for the reader is more quickly moved into the real action of the story. But in some stories two, even three scenes are required. For the body no semblance of a working rule can be given. As many scenes are required as will convincingly lead the reader to the climax; although this is hardly a helpful statement, it

must serve. The ending usually requires more than one scene and rather generally not more than two. But here again nothing like a rule can be laid down. The average length of magazine short stories to-day is between 3500 and 6000 words. There are very occasional short stories of 1000 words, and there are more often stories of 10,000, even 12,000 words. But they rarely exceed this length, and the majority contain less than 6000 words. Obviously, with so wide a divergence in length, conditions will vary considerably, just as they will vary with different stories of the same length. The only safe direction to offer is that the beginning should be as short as possible; the body should contain the major portion of the action; and the ending should be somewhere near a fifth of the length of the body.

The short story is always individual and no arbitrary dogma with regard to length and number of scenes will fit more than a single example. One might with quite as much sanity propose to construct two different makes of motor car from the same plans. The two cars, when finished, are both automobiles. But their specifications are entirely different. The same general rules apply in the construction of both; but the specific plans differ with each. So it is with the short story. One can lay down general rules of construction: one can say, by analogy, if you put wings and a pro-



peller on this product you will be constructing not an automobile but an airplane; one cannot state arbitrary rules by which each individual short story can be measured step by step.

### ILLUSTRATIVE SUGGESTIONS

1. The author has found that the most effective method of studying plot-building lies in preparing *scene-briefs* of magazine stories. Analysis is the readiest and most practical means of impressing the dramatic progression of action in episodes upon the student's mind. The simplest scheme for briefing the author believes to be as follows:

- a. Cut up the story into columns and paste these single columns down the left-hand side of sheets of plain paper. Make definite breaks at the end of each scene and number the scenes one, two, three, four, etc. Make broader divisions at the end of the beginning and of the body of the story for a summary of what has taken place in each structural division.
- b. At the head of the brief write down the name of the chief actor and his basic characteristic and state his problem as simply as possible. Now take up the structural divisions of the story, scene by scene, and utilize the blank space at the right of the printed column which you have pasted on the paper to note down what has been accomplished in each scene. Beside the first scene you might write, for example: "Introduction of chief actor and basic characteristic. Statement of original situation and problem. Introduction of ameliorating circumstance which is . . ." The brief should also note opposite each scene its contribution to the

solution of the problem. Isolated from the story as a whole, it is usually possible to determine whether a particular scene fulfills a valid function in the structural whole. In the same way it should note just how each scene shows the basic characteristic in action.

- c. Four points should be noted down in particular at the place of their introduction: the problem, the ameliorating circumstance, the climax, and the dénouement. At the end of the beginning and body a short summary should be made of the accomplishment in each of these structural divisions. At the close of the ending, a similar summary should be prepared, but more complete than the others since, besides the accomplishment, it should indicate any points which have not been fully taken into consideration by the writer.

The practical value of this briefing process is fairly obvious. While it may seem at first sight to be something in the nature of a chore, the preparation of two or three should develop a definite interest in uncovering the mechanics of a short story which would remove to a great extent the somewhat pedestrian character of the work. Naturally, briefing one's own stories will prove of the utmost value if for some reason or other they fail to "click." In the Illustrative Suggestions following Chapter VI a further suggestion is offered for developing the brief.

2. Keeping a notebook is an invaluable means of salting away one's good ideas. Not only whole scene or story ideas, but phrases, possible story titles, characters, any scraps which seem to have possibilities should be preserved in this fashion. No idea is too trivial to be noted down. It may suggest

something more important later on. Perhaps more valuable than the notes themselves is the fact that the mere mechanical process of writing them down seems to develop the writer's "fiction nose." The habit grows with indulgence, observation quickens, and ideas suggest themselves more freely.

3. The proper scene with which to begin a story is a choice which is sometimes puzzling. In this chapter the test for its authenticity has been fairly well established. The author has found the following scheme helpful in overcoming this difficulty: With a number of magazine stories write down all of the materials which are suggested by the beginning but not actually set down. That is, if the first scene discovers the chief actor vacationing in the mountains, it undoubtedly suggests also the city in which he lives. Perhaps he has quarreled with his fiancée and left her angrily. Perhaps he is a salesman whose employer has told him that he must get a certain big order or lose his position, the object of his selling activities being located in this same mountain resort. All of this suggests previous scenes not included as part of the action. Try to write them yourself, prefacing them to the story and then deciding why they are not essential. The writer should always bear in mind that the story begins not only with the crucial situation, but just before an ameliorating circumstance presents itself which makes it seem that the chief actor may have a chance of solving his problem.



## CHAPTER VI

### THE MECHANICS OF SUSPENSE

BECOME the Inquiring Reporter for half an hour. Ask five short-story readers picked at random for a general definition of *suspense* and it is an even chance that their replies could be summarized somewhat in this manner: "Suspense is the moment in a mystery story when the villain has abducted the girl, and you sit on the edge of your chair waiting to see whether the hero will rescue her in time." At least four of the five would deny that any but a mystery or a thrilling adventure story contains an ounce — or whatever the measure — of suspense. Yet every short story worth an editor's precious moment — no matter whether it be a breathtaking adventure yarn or a frothy, amusing bit of nonsense — is packed with this vitalizing, necessary quality. Without it, the reader lays his magazine aside with a yawn; without it, the most promising materials become dull and completely undramatic.

Suspense is that question raised in the reader's mind as to the outcome of certain struggles, or *conflicts*, which are fought out before him. Although its springs must be fitted carefully into the story, suspense itself is actually a matter of the reader's reaction. The author

raises a series of questions in the reader's mind with regard to the fortunes of his chief actor and minor actors. Will they be able to do this? Will they succeed in that? Question succeeds question, each of them arousing suspense, or, to put it more simply, making the reader insist: "I've got to find out whether the chief actor succeeds or not."

Suspense, then, is the author's snare to catch and develop the reader's desire to learn the outcome of certain conflicts. It is no haphazard by-product of any given group of materials with fiction possibilities. It must be carefully developed if the story is to have its maximum effectiveness. This is not to deny that short-story materials not infrequently shape themselves naturally into narratives properly vitalized with suspense. They do. But more often they do not, and even in those cases where suspense is naturally present a proper concern for it and careful nurturing will increase its intensity. This discussion of the mechanics of suspense is designed as a test for a necessary ingredient of the short-story compound.

Suspense grows from two roots, *contrast* and *conflict*. The latter is the natural complement of the former; without one, the other can hardly be present. *Contrast* may be defined simply as the differences which exist between persons, between persons and backgrounds — environments — or between two backgrounds. One

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man is selfish, mean, unkind; another is generous, good, kind: that is contrast in character. One man is tall, strong, healthy; another is short, weak, sickly: that is contrast in physical appearance and condition. One woman is frank, quick in her movements, direct in her actions; another is evasive, languid, apt to take roundabout ways to reach a simple point: that is contrast both in physical and spiritual qualities. A man is born and bred in the city, accustomed to its ways, its amusements, its conveniences; he finds himself in a tiny village far from a metropolis: that is contrast between a person and a background, or, depending somewhat upon the emphasis, a contrast between two backgrounds.

Contrast is one of the liveliest springs of interest in fiction. Not only in the short story but in other fiction forms as well, actors in particular are contrasted deliberately. Without contrast, all is silver-gray, placid; there is none of the reality of life. Chief actor and minor actors perform their appointed business in perfect peace with their background, with their situation, with themselves. There is nothing to hold the reader's interest because there seems every reason to believe that all will be the same with the actors to-morrow, or next week, or next year. "If only there were a bit of difference between them, now," sighs the reader, "then something interesting might happen.



If only the chief actor were moving against an uncongenial background; if only he weren't so placid with that girl whom he will marry, of course. If only there were some little thing to make life a bit less certain."

And so there must be something to strike a contrast — something to tint the silver-gray with brighter colors — if the story is to catch and hold the reader's interest. The very adoption of the X-ray method of narration implies the necessity of some contrast, for it puts a problem in the chief actor's life which he must solve — some condition with which he is not satisfied. So, by the very nature of things, he must be contrasted with another actor or with his background to a certain extent if the materials are at all suitable for molding into a short story. It is the author's problem to accentuate this contrast and to inject others. The main concern should be to make sure that all of the actors are not of an identical type and temperament. Not that they need to be radically different — it is not necessary to set a hardened criminal against a Baptist minister in order to develop contrast. There need be only those marked differences in type which keep the story clear of the rut of placidity and afford opportunities for conflict.

Contrast is the stuff of *conflict*, but *conflict* is the stuff of *suspense*. If all of the actors are in perfect accord with each other and with their

background, then there is no conflict between them or between them and their background. And if no conflict exists, then there is nothing for the reader to wonder about — no impending changes whose outcome is in doubt. If conflict is lacking, no suspense is created to make the reader continue until he learns what happens to the chief actor in solving his problem and just how the conclusion disposes of the whole situation.

Drama, in its most simplified definition, is men in conflict. Because dramatic action, which depends upon conflict, is the moving force of the short story, it is worth while to examine in some detail the mechanics of conflict. There are five clear-cut possibilities for it:

1. The conflict of man with himself. A poor man sees a wallet drop from the pocket of a man some distance ahead of him. No one else is in sight; the poor man might wait until the other was gone and retrieve the wallet without fear of detection. He hesitates, however. His conscience warns him that such an act would be little short of stealing. A struggle ensues between his desire for the money he imagines must be in the wallet and his better nature. That is conflict number one.
2. The conflict of man with his background. The scene is the Klondike in '98. A young man from New York has joined the gold rush. The cold, the frightful discomforts of the trail, all these

bring upon him a loathing and a hatred for the country which surrounds him. There is a conflict between him and all of this bleak environment which hems him in. That is conflict number two. 3. The conflict of man with his situation. A lad of twenty in a small town has been forced to take over the family store upon the death of his father, forsaking the hope of college and a professional career upon which he had planned. He must work in order to support his mother and two small sisters. How, in spite of this, is he to get the coveted university degree? Here is an actor in conflict with his situation. That is conflict number three. 4. The conflict of man with man. Two lawyers fight for victory in an important case. Both of them are young; to each victory will mean the beginning of a reputation. Each is clever, brilliant even. Each uses all of his skill to defeat the other. They are directly opposed in attaining the same end. That is conflict number four. 5. The conflict of man with Fate. A doctor, working with natives for twenty years in the interior of Africa, finds the cure for a hitherto incurable disease. The experiments of a score of years have at last been rewarded; he can retire with the knowledge of a life's effort culminated in presenting mankind with one of its greatest boons. Flushed with satisfaction and happiness, he begins the long voyage back to civilization and America. So



out of touch with affairs has he been in his wilderness station that fellow passengers are able to surprise him with news of a number of startling developments in the world. Arrived in New York he goes to the hospital where he performed his early experiments. A new building has replaced the structure he knew. His former chief? Dead these four years, he is told. Disappointed, he seeks the new head, and pours out to him the details of his remarkable discovery. The other listens kindly, but tells him at the end of his recital that two years before another man in another part of the world had announced the same cure. Fate, in other words, had stepped in to rob the doctor of the fruit of his twenty years' effort. That is conflict number five.

Every short story is built upon one major conflict and a series of smaller ones. The major conflict rises directly out of the problem of the chief actor. Sometimes it is a clear, simple conflict of one of the five types. More often it is a combination of two. The most usual form combines the third and fourth types: the conflict of man with his situation and the conflict of man with man. But despite the combination it is usually possible to separate the two; to find by analysis that one of them is the dominant conflict and the other a corollary. For example, in a story of the early West, the chief actor's problem is to file title to a piece of valu-

able property rich in gold. It is government land, he has staked a claim, and sets out for the office of the proper Federal official. Meanwhile, another man has likewise discovered the possibilities of the land. He has pulled up the chief actor's stakes, put down his own, and is racing for the same Federal official. The chief actor's problem in the first place was to file his claim. It was merely a conflict with his situation — the necessary trip from his claim to the office, beset by the difficulties of such a journey. But immediately he learns that another man is racing for the same destination, another conflict is injected. Now it is not only a conflict of the chief actor with his situation, trying to cover ground as rapidly as possible; it becomes also a conflict of man and man, each trying to defeat the other's purpose. Still, the basic problem of the chief actor is represented by the first conflict. The other is a corollary. It is by no means always important to note these differentiations. But often in plotting the value of understanding them appears when the author is anxious to test the scenes he has laid out for their suspense potentialities. If conflict enough is there, he need not worry himself with wondering if it is simple or complex. When conflict is present, strict definition and analysis are unnecessary.

Suspense does not arise alone from the development of a single major conflict which rep-

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resents the chief actor's struggles to solve his problem. Every scene of the story should develop its own minor conflict. As in the case of the major conflict, these minor ones are sometimes clear examples of one of the five types. Quite as frequently, they, too, are combinations. Usually, however, there is not more than a single conflict in each scene.

By way of illustration, construct a scene from that somewhat melodramatic story of the race to file title. Give the actors horses to carry them. The chief actor spurs on until his progress is suddenly halted by a stream. The bridge has been washed away by spring floods. The water appears too swift for fording. Clear vision up and down the stream for some distance discloses no other bridge and no more narrow point at which fording might be less dangerous. Here is a strong conflict of man with his situation. How is he to get across that stream? He must do it, but how? The reader's interest is fixed upon this necessity and his mind echoes the sympathetic and excited question: How is he to get across? The chief actor — and the reader — can almost hear the hoof beats of the minor actor's horse thundering in pursuit. Something must be done and quickly. The chief actor finally decides that he must take the chance of fording, and this is the climax of this particular scene. He drives his horse into the water and, while the reader



watches, struggles to the other side. As his horse scrambles up the opposite bank to safety the conflict is resolved. Another one should be waiting in the next scene — and there is still the major conflict which will be resolved only when title is filed by one of the two men — but the conflict of this particular scene has been fought through and won. The reader's scene-question is answered: the chief actor has forded the stream safely.

Now the short story should be built up of scenes such as this. Not that there will always be "one wide river to cross," not that the story need be a succession of melodramatic episodes, but the construction of each scene should follow in miniature the construction of the short story itself. There is the minor problem which presents a minor conflict. The climax comes, the problem is solved, and the conflict over as the scene shifts to another. But through each scene the author has carried the reader in suspense, wondering whether its problem will be solved. Obviously, the problem is to be solved only by the conflict of one actor with himself, with background, with situation, with another actor, or with Fate. Therefore, if the problem is there, then the conflict is there. If the conflict is there, then suspense is present and the reader's interest is securely held.

Each conflict raises its complementary question in the reader's mind. When these two

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join, then suspense has been created. The reader, placed in touch with the story's original situation by the author, asks first the general question suggested by the chief actor's main problem: "Will he be able to solve his problem?" As the body of the story begins, each scene displays its minor problem and its minor conflict which give rise to the reader's minor question: "Will he manage to circumvent this difficulty which impedes his progress toward the solution of his problem?" And just as the reader's major question is answered at the story's close, so the reader's minor questions are answered as the scenes themselves close.

Each scene should represent a definite step toward the solution of the chief actor's main problem. And, although through every scene the interest of the reader is focused upon the solution of this problem, it is focused particularly upon the specific step toward solution represented by the scene in question. For this reason, the step must be a definite one toward the goal. It has been noted before that nothing unessential to the story itself should be included in the narration. Obviously, then, each scene must push the action forward and the interest of the reader, focused upon the chief actor as he moves through this particular scene, will likewise be fixed upon his solution of the main problem of the story.

For this reason, it is necessary to keep each

scene simple in its action and in its accomplishment. If the action is complicated by confusing detail, it requires too great concentration by the reader and destroys the smooth flow of the interest in the major problem toward whose solution the scene represents but a single step. By keeping each scene simple in its construction, none of them stops the stream of action. The reader watches the scene, not as of major interest in itself, but merely as a step toward solution.

The value of understanding conflict lies in the easy aid which it affords to analyzing suspense. It should be possible to state each scene in terms of its conflict. If the conflict is definite and clear, then it is probable that the scene itself is capable of holding the reader's interest — that the mechanics of suspense have been set up. Each scene should be tested in this manner if there is any question of its effectiveness: Make a statement of conflict by asserting, "The conflict of this scene is . . ." If the statement can be finished in a simple sentence it is certain that the scene does not suffer from overcomplexity and that its purpose is clear.

How does all this apply to plotting a short story's action? Largely as an assistance in mapping out the scope of each particular scene and in testing the value of the scene as a contributing part of the whole. Each scene in the



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body of the story should add further proof for the theorem which has been stated in the beginning. It should also advance the action of the story toward its climax. It is quite possible to imagine scenes which might fulfill both of these requirements and yet be deficient in the conflict which would keep the reader's interest a lively and continually questioning quantity. Conflict is a fundamental requirement because it is the stuff of suspense. Without suspense the reader does not care to find out whether the theorem is proved or not.

Just a word about suspense in the final scenes. The story sweeps on from the climax to the dénouement and the solution of the problem. But suspense here is an easier matter. If the story has held the interest *through the climax*, it is safe to guarantee that the reader will be more than eager to read the final scenes to find out what fate meets the chief actor and the minor actors. The ending is crowded with natural suspense if the body of the story has been properly constructed because in it the chief actor actually solves his problem and the reader is eager to follow out the action which this active solution entails. For example, that harried rider seeking to file his claim may be shown in the final scene dashing up the main street of the tiny Western village to the office which marks the end of his quest, after having made his final decision — reached the climax

of the story — in a personal struggle with the other man, perhaps. From another street his rival bears down upon the same building. The reader watches with fascination this race for a fortune. Natural suspense crowds it because this is the result of whatever climax has been arranged for the chief actor and is the solution of the problem.

This is the point toward which the discussion was leading in the last chapter when it was pointed out that although it might not appear so thrilling to the reader as scenes which followed, the climax was the real point of highest interest. The analysis of conflict adds something to a clarification of that point. If the climax is not approached carefully through scenes in which conflict provokes suspense, then the reader — unless he be hard pressed to amuse himself — will hardly have reached the climax before laying the magazine aside with a yawn. If the climax is prepared for in the preceding scenes, however, the reader's interest is flogged to its highest pitch. He hitches forward in his seat as the chief actor decides to take the step which will mean success or failure. There is no question of the reader's interest now — the author has ensnared it. The last scene or two, then, pitches this interest of the reader a tone or two higher quite naturally. Thoroughly engrossed in the fortunes of the chief actor, he must find out whether the problem is solved successfully.

This discussion of conflict indicates again how fallacious is the conception of the short story as the natural, simple recital of a series of potentially interesting episodes. The short story is simple only when its mechanics are thoroughly understood. It is natural only in the sense that the actor on the stage is natural who evokes the enthusiastic comment: "Blank played his part perfectly. It seemed as though he weren't acting at all!" But of course Blank was acting, and the comment of the playgoer indicates that he was acting a bit more cleverly than any one else in the cast. Blank is undoubtedly an artist to create so mystifying an illusion of naturalness. Just so, the short story which strikes its reader as being so capitally lifelike is carefully built up by its author, not to reproduce life, but to give the illusion of it. In this conscious construction, conflict, which does not make itself felt every day at every moment, must play its careful part. No man is always in conflict with his fellows, with his situation, with his background, with himself, or with Fate—even though he is caught in one of those crucial moments with which the short story deals. Yet the short story itself, in order to hold the reader's interest, must show one continuous conflict and a series of minor ones which mark the steps in the resolution of the major conflict. The record of a week, or a month, or a year of a man's actual life is care-



fully sifted — this is the sorting of materials — and those events, episodes, and scenes are selected which best show the solution of the problem which faces him. The moments of no significance are discarded for those more important ones which demonstrate the proof of the theorem.

In this molding of materials and careful selection of the significant, the author's aim is to cut away all of what might be called the "placid" material, leaving only that which is conflict provoking and necessary to the reader's understanding of the fashion in which this actor solved his problem. The result should be so apparently true to life that the reader's comment will be similar to the playgoer's about Actor Blank. Yet the short-story writer has not given life — he has only produced a very thrilling illusion of life, stripped of all that makes it humdrum and uninteresting.

### ILLUSTRATIVE SUGGESTIONS

1. Every short story affords illustrations of contrast and the reader will find it valuable to check his understanding of this chapter by picking out the contrasts in several magazine short stories. Find contrasts of the types mentioned in Chapter VI. Devise half a dozen story themes of your own with contrasts of both character and environment. In reading, learn to make yourself "contrast-conscious," and test your own stories for this vital quality.

2. In order to complete the *brief* outlined in the

Illustrative Suggestions for Chapter V, the conflicts of each scene should be included. Add to the general statement of chief actor, basic characteristic, and problem at the beginning, a statement of the main conflict. Then with your analysis of each scene make a statement of its individual conflict. With this record before you, it is not difficult to isolate the germs of suspense.

3. Notice particularly in Chapter VI the emphasis placed upon carrying through the individual conflicts of each scene the main conflict of the chief actor. Naturally if each scene carries forward the chief actor toward solution of his problem the scene conflict will emphasize the main conflict as well. But making sure of it adds another check upon the story's effectiveness which should not be overlooked.

4. As an illustration of this running conflict developed through all the scenes, think of the individual scene conflicts as *overlapping*. That is, each scene leads forward naturally to its successor; there are no definite breaks; each is dependent upon its predecessor. As an illustration of this practice, notice the overlapping of thought in the paragraphs of any well-constructed piece of writing. Try, here and there, to cut off the last sentence or two of a paragraph without altering or spoiling the sense. If the story or article has been well constructed this can be done only at the sacrifice of some pertinent point or at least some nice shade of meaning. For the last sentence in each of the paragraphs will leave the thought suspended so that the first sentence of the next depends upon it directly. This same process should be carried into the construction of conflict. That is, each scene conflict should lead up to the scene conflict which follows. And each scene conflict should be dependent to some extent upon its predecessor.

## CHAPTER VII

### TELLING THE STORY

IF this were a treatise on style, it would be proper to examine exhaustively the various kinds of writing: exposition, description, dialogue, and narration. And although style is only incidentally a consideration of this manual — because style is, after all, an individual accomplishment, too precious to be pinched with rules and directions — consideration of the part which these various types of writing play in the modern short story is a necessary part of the technical equipment. Examine the tales of Poe, of Balzac, of Guy de Maupassant, or of any short-story writer who flourished before the turn of the century and it will be found that all of them deal extensively in each of these four types of writing. But in the modern short story, exposition and description, as such, have dropped very noticeably from the picture. It is worth while investigating this development and the reasons for it, as well as the improvement, or lack of it, which it has brought about.

Without entering into a discussion of the artistic merits of the authors mentioned or their contemporaries, it may be noted that most of them were interested in producing a



*single effect.* Now the single effect was not so much a concrete part of the story — although it was in the story, of course — as it was the effect which the story produced upon the reader's mind. Thus, Poe was most often seeking to induce horror in the mind of the reader. Each of his paragraphs was built up, word by word, with the one purpose of creating a cumulative feeling of horror. Although his stories are still affecting, although they still give the semblance of life, if one stops to analyze his canvas, it is life twisted far out of its natural appearance. One does not feel that his stories are untrue. But one can hardly imagine the events in many of them confronting any of one's own friends or acquaintances, as is the case with the great majority of the stories in the magazines to-day. Modern stories generally deal with interesting aspects of the usual; strange effects of the bizarre are more often the concern of older stories.

Concentration upon a single effect requires concentration of both background and actors. It is not merely, for example, that the chief actor himself is depressed, filled with the certainty of impending doom. The setting of the story, the houses, the very landscape build up the *atmosphere* which creeps into the reader's consciousness. These older stories, for the most part, are not concerned so much with a continuity of movement — as is the modern

short story — but with the continuity of impression, of atmosphere. To preserve this impression, this single effect, exposition and descriptive writing are necessary in abundance.

Exposition has been discussed previously although never as a distinct type of writing. Its function, of course, is to explain. When exposition, as a type of writing, is introduced in fiction, its effect is to show the author drawing the reader aside to *explain* the original situation or some succeeding point. Thus, to illustrate the point, the author writes:

John Blank was not a wealthy man. He lived in a small house in an unfashionable suburb of Chicago with his wife and the two children she had given him. Their car was five years old, the paint on the house six. Yet by strict economy they managed to pay the taxes and even enjoy a bit of luxury now and then in the form of a drive in town to one of the moving-picture palaces in the Loop.

This is pure explanation. It does not show either the chief actor or a minor actor in an actual setting. It is merely the author's explanation to the reader of certain facts about the chief actor which are necessary to his understanding of the original situation. It is unnecessary, of course, to explain description beyond stating that it is a picture in words of a person, a landscape, or an inanimate object. Its introduction also has the effect of making the author pluck at the sleeve of the reader to

point out the details in appearance of an actor, a landscape, or some object which appears upon the short story's background.

Each of these types of writing was essential to the story of the single effect because the primary interest of that story was not to show men and women in action, but to set up an impression in the reader's mind. Usually the result was not to set up a stage with actors moving across it, but to place a skilled narrator before the reader to describe a mystifying or horror-producing string of events. Careful explanation of detail was an integral part of the method as was description of various aspects of the setting and actors which would contribute to the single effect. Since the author's interest was not in movement but in effect, he was not forced to the rapid pace which marks the modern short story. He began leisurely, he emphasized his effect cumulatively, and he moved with an air of grim inevitability toward his climax and conclusion. But since he had not fixed upon a chief actor working toward the solution of a problem, he was not troubled with the necessity of maintaining a focus of interest upon the dominating character. Since his story was not seen through a chief actor's consciousness, he did not stop the action if he devoted a paragraph or two to exposition or pure description because there was no continuous flow of action.



In the modern short story, however, continuity of movement is essential, and with it has grown up the practice of introducing both exposition and description, not by drawing the reader aside for the word of explanation or the picture, but by inserting both piecemeal in connection with the narration and the dialogue, injecting bits here and there so that the reader is given what he needs to know but is not forced to turn aside from his main interest — the chief actor's solution of his problem.

The difference in approach between the modern short story and the older one is suggested in these two paragraphs, introductions to the same story. Here is the way the older writer might have done it:

Comfortably separated from the high road and almost hidden by the luxuriance of a phalanx of giant elms, the old Smith place beamed down upon the stream of motors which rolled past its broad lawns. More than a hundred years before, old Captain Noah Smith had left his ships and his wharves to lay the foundation of the square brick front which still stood as the central portion of the house. Later generations, more prolific in children than Captain Noah, had built the wings which stretched out from three stories of brick, curiously fashioning them of wood and giving the whole effect a sort of piecemeal aspect which marred the stanch upright square in which Captain Noah had expressed himself.

This purely static paragraph of description and

exposition fixes the reader's eye upon a setting, but not upon men and women. Thus far, no hint has been given of the story's theme. No actors have moved across the scene. The reader has still to learn what part this pleasant setting is to play in the story for which it serves as introduction. The modern method would introduce the chief actor, together with such impressionistic touches of description as might be managed without curbing the stream of action. Here is the way the modern writer might have done it:

John Smith leaped out of the car before its brakes had finished their noisy protest at such unusual treatment. Frightening a leisurely chicken or two, truant from the barns hidden by the two great frame wings of the comfortable old farmhouse, John raced the two hundred feet through the elms to the open front door. "Mary," he shouted to the echoing hall. "Mary, I've got it!"

The modern writer, in other words, sees movement as his prime concern and slips his description into the narrative as he goes along. Instead of the inclusion of paragraphs whose only function is to describe the setting, he focuses the reader's attention upon his chief actor, setting him off against such details of background as seem necessary to draft an outline which the reader may fill in for himself.

One can hardly lay down any direct prohibition of pure description or pure exposition.

Naturally, cases will arise when either the one or the other is a useful and effective method of presenting important information to the reader — even of heightening the dramatic interest of the story. But the inexperienced writer will be safer if he tries to circumvent their use. Usually it is possible to give sufficient detail through the piecemeal method. And unless the atmosphere of a story is important to the dramatic effect, no more detail will be necessary.

Narrative writing, or narration, is the author's method of creating a moving picture in which the actors move about and play their parts. For example:

Camilla walked slowly down Madison Avenue feasting her eyes upon the displays in the various shop windows. For three blocks her leisurely progress continued until suddenly it was arrested by a chair in one of the windows which looked strangely familiar.

Narration embodies the action of the story. It shows the movement of actors, it shows their thoughts. It is anything which pushes the story itself toward its climax and conclusion. Narration is the backbone of every short story. In the modern X-ray method it dominates all other types of writing. Because the X-ray method presupposes a *moving picture in words* — a story in which the reader's attention remains focused upon the chief actor as he moves



through the various scenes, most of the story is related in narration or in *dialogue* which often performs the same function as narration.

Dialogue is simple conversation. It is any statement which should be included in quotation marks together with its *narrative tag*. As the quantity of exposition and description decreased in the course of the short story's evolution toward the present X-ray type, dialogue became more and more important because of the valuable aid which it offers the writer in presenting a natural, living actor to his reader and also because of its possibilities for conveying information which could not properly come into the story through the eyes of the chief actor. These two uses of dialogue bear discussion in some detail.

There is no way in which a man reveals himself more quickly than in his conversation. Talk with any man and in five minutes it is possible to form a fairly accurate impression of him. Conversation, then, is of value in the short story because it gives the reader the same opportunity to size up the chief actor and the minor actors for himself. It is in dialogue that the author has his best chance to emphasize and prove the character which he has arbitrarily given his chief actor in the beginning through the introduction of the basic characteristic and other revealing character hints.

But there is a danger in all this. Because

dialogue reveals character more vividly than any other form of writing, there is a temptation to use too much of it — to present details which might far better be introduced through narration. Too much dialogue whose only function is to reveal character grows tiresome quite as quickly as the bore who insists upon talking about himself. Dialogue, with an important exception to be noted later, should generally be used as a spice to season the solid parts of narration.

The *narrative tag* of dialogue is quite as important and revealing as the actual conversation itself. It is particularly valuable as a means of keeping the reader's attention focused upon the speaker himself rather than upon his abstract words. To illustrate, as one listens to a man, one notes also his movements, his tone, his emphasis. One notes that he rises from his chair and walks to the window; that he examines a tree or a flower in the garden; that he fills his pipe from a tin of tobacco on the table beside him. Most of these movements may be quite apart from the subject of his conversation. If one were to shut one's eyes, the movements would go unnoticed and the conversation would remain words alone. When one's eyes are open, however, the speaker's person and movements form an indissociable part of the conversation. The *narrative tag* serves to keep the speaker himself always in the focus of the

reader, and his movements — even a turn of the head — tend to keep the scene an active and not a static picture.

In its simplest form, the tag is a curt “he said” or “she asked.” More descriptively used, it colors the tone or emphasis of the speaker’s words: “he groaned,” “she screamed,” “he demanded.” Used still more extensively it carries the functions of narration into dialogue, making the actors not only speak but move. Note, for example, the way in which the narrative tags heighten the effect of the simple unadorned section of dialogue in the examples below. The actors are Sergeant Blade and a suspect he is questioning as the possible perpetrator of a robbery. The scene is a room in the Blank County jail.

“All right, what did you do with your gun?”

“I ain’t got a gun.”

“Come on, now. None of that stuff. I know you had a gun. Where is it?”

“I ain’t got a gun.”

“Well, if you haven’t got a gun, how did you hold up the watchman at the plant?”

“I didn’t hold him up. I ain’t never been to the Arcol place.”

“Oh, so you know where the robbery was, do you?”

“You been talking about it, ain’t you?”

“Never mentioned it. Now look here. I know you were there. One of your pals squealed on you.”

“The ——”



Here is the same bit of dialogue animated by narrative tags:

"All right, what did you do with your gun?" The sergeant had drawn up a chair, turned it around, and straddled it, his arms resting upon the back, his eyes glowering into the face before him.

For an instant the shifty eyes of the other brushed the sergeant's unrelenting gaze before they resumed their study of the floor. "I ain't got a gun," said the prisoner sullenly.

"Come on, now," blustered the sergeant, hitching his chair an inch or two nearer. "None of that stuff. I know you had a gun. Where is it?"

This time the eyes remained on the floor. "I ain't got a gun," their owner repeated, something of a weary note tempering his sullenness.

The sergeant's attentive ear heard it as a hopeful sign. He decided to follow another tack. "Well, if you haven't got a gun," he demanded, "how did you hold up the watchman at the plant?" He hitched his chair again as he uttered the last word and the front legs came down on the wooden floor as a sort of staccato emphasis. The other started slightly at the sound and his eyes once more brushed the sergeant's face, to discover, the sergeant knew, if it revealed any clue as to the exact extent of his knowledge.

Finally the answer came. The prisoner was evidently being as careful as possible in his denials. "I didn't hold him up," he muttered, and then added as a sort of alibi, "I ain't never been to the Arcol place."

"Oh, so you know where the robbery was, do you?" shouted the sergeant, leaping up and throwing his chair aside with a clatter.

There was an involuntary movement of the pris-

oner's shoulders as though he might suspect he had made some incriminating statement. But his eyes kept to the floor as he explained: "You been talking about it, ain't you?"

The sergeant laughed mirthlessly. "Never mentioned it," he said, and then adopting his inquisitorial manner again he leaned over the prisoner. "Now look here," he said. "I know you were there." He paused a moment to see the effect of this remark before playing his trump card. There was no movement of the shoulders this time. He leaned forward again. "One of your pals squealed on you," he shot out triumphantly.

The prisoner jumped half out of his chair and his eyes met squarely the sergeant's triumphant gaze. "The ——" he began, before he realized the trap which had been laid for him. Then his eyes dropped again and he sank helplessly back in his chair.

The object of the narrative tag is to keep the stream of action flowing through conversation. Dialogue which reveals character and does not advance the action by conveying new information to the reader is as static as exposition or description. By enlivening it with bits of narration such as appear in the second of the preceding examples dialogue serves to keep the movement of the story in progress.

One of the apparent limitations of maintaining a unity of focus through the short story is the difficulty of introducing information important to the reader's understanding which could hardly come within the active experience of the chief actor. Dialogue in the hands of a

minor actor solves the difficulty. A minor actor tells the chief actor — and thus, the reader — essential facts which the chief actor must know in order to solve his problem and has no way of finding out unless a minor actor reveals them to him. Dialogue is particularly valuable in conveying the necessary exposition to the reader at the story's beginning. Instead of the author's drawing the reader aside to inform him of the story's background, skillful dialogue may be used without sacrificing the flow of action.

All dialogue should be tested by these two questions: "Does it reveal character?" "Does it advance the action, either directly by bringing new information to the attention of the chief actor, or indirectly by explaining the background of the situation?" If the answer is an easy affirmative, then it is safe to assume that the dialogue is properly introduced. If there is doubt, the author would be wise to see whether the same information cannot be conveyed by different means — by narration. For the rule of the short story is simplicity, and narration is the simplest form of writing. Dialogue is of inestimable value in making a story live. But it should never be used to report movement which is not significant. Perhaps that statement will bear explanation. Suppose the chief actor of a story to be a young lawyer in a town some forty miles from



New York City. Business calls him to town. When such an event occurs in life it is fair to suppose that at the breakfast table the lawyer would inform his wife that he intended taking the 9.07 train for New York. It is equally fair to suppose that she would ask him why he was going and that he might tell her something about the nature of the business. But in a short story none of this should be reported in dialogue for it is not essential to vivify an important development. Something really important may await the chief actor in New York. But it does not begin until he is safely there. If it seems necessary to speak of the departure at all because of some minor significance which it may possess, then it should be hurried through briefly in narration, without the emphasis of dialogue.

Dialogue has the effect of placing definite emphasis upon the development it covers for it throws the spotlight directly upon the scene and holds it in focus, not as a mere part of a movement, but as the movement itself. If the development is not of a significance proportionate to this emphasis the focus of attention upon it has the effect of leading the reader upon a false scent. Since nothing should be a part of the short story which does not have a definite purpose in solving the chief actor's problem, emphasis upon any portion of a scene has the effect of investing it with significance. If that

portion of the scene has no special significance, its emphasis detracts from the clear flow of the important action. The reader, discovering that the scene had no hidden clue which he has thus far been unable to discover, turns back to follow the stream again. But his interest has been definitely interrupted and is not so easily caught again.

There is one possibility for the extensive use of dialogue which should be explained here. It is directly concerned with developments which depend not upon the chief actor's physical movement but upon deliberations in his own mind. To illustrate the difference: A farmer might be drilling for water on his property and be suddenly surprised by an oil gusher. Or that same farmer might be approached by a neighbor's son who has been off studying at the State Agricultural College, majoring in geology. His experiments have led him to believe there is oil upon the land, but specialized machinery will be needed to get at it. The farmer has sufficient money to pay for the machinery but is loath to risk it in what may be a worthless endeavor. The boy pleads with him, explaining his reasons for believing that oil exists, and he finally persuades the farmer to take the chance with his money. This scene is one in which no particular action — in the physical sense — takes place. But a very important development in the story is concluded, none

the less. Although it is not physical action, it is action in the literary sense. And dialogue is the only means of vivifying it. In this type of scene, only the extensive use of dialogue will properly advance the action. The author suggests that this money which will be needed represents the farmer's lifetime savings. The boy's word alone is the only evidence he has that oil exists upon his property. The riches which it might bring are tempting, but the thought of losing his savings is a terrible one. Here, then, is a period of high action which may take place with the actors sitting quietly upon the front porch of the old farmhouse. And it lives through dialogue. This is the exception noted earlier in this chapter as the single justification for the extensive use of dialogue.

It is an excellent rule to follow that the greater proportion of physical action a story contains the smaller the proportion of dialogue. But the greater the proportion of reflective action like the above, the greater the proportion of dialogue necessary to vivify it. Dialogue in this type of scene, liberally enlivened by narrative tags, becomes the carrying vehicle of the action, usurping the more normal function of narration.

Any very valuable discussion of narration would be little more than a lecture upon style. And style, it has been observed before, is not



properly a consideration of this manual. But this much may be noted, as a comment upon the modern magazine short story, that its narrative writing tends toward the bright and crackling creation of swift-moving episodes. Unlike the older story which set in its beginning the mood which was to run throughout, the modern story attempts to reproduce the illusion of life as it hurries on toward each new development. Where the older story often built up a world of its own, lifelike because it was brilliantly enough created to make its reader believe in it, the modern story creates a world which is lifelike because it is the world in which we live, familiar in its details, different only in that the humdrum unessentials have been carefully weeded out. The re-creation of this world is best served by a simple style, devoid of ornamentation. Its actors speak naturally in the idiom of the moment, its imagery is bright and modern, quite in keeping with a world stripped, so it would believe, of much which it considers sentimental and false. All of this is the direction of narrative style to-day. Where the style of yesterday was one of adjectives, to-day's looks more to its verbs and adverbs because they heighten and quicken the movement. Where yesterday's was heavy with carefully induced atmosphere, the style of to-day aims simply at clarity and swiftness of movement. Short-story style to-day makes

no conscious bid for the artistic by sonorous phrase or ponderous description. In its twin ideals of clarity and movement it keeps pace with the world about it. For the short story deals with typical men and women. And typical men and women are a definite reflection of the life around them.

Narration in the short story, then, is unadorned. It recognizes that the shortest distance between two points is the straight line and it makes that line as distinct as possible by the use of vivid phrase. Because the movement is rapid, it notes only those details along the way which, almost literally, "he may read who runs." Its proper interest is always in advancing the action — carrying the chief actor toward the solution of his problem.

### ILLUSTRATIVE SUGGESTIONS

1. The ability to write vivid, revealing dialogue depends directly upon the author's ability to *see* clearly before him at all times the character whose speech he is attempting to reproduce. As a first exercise, use some friend for a subject. He has just been offered an attractive position in Chicago. You meet him on the street and he tells you about it. Reproduce not only his statements but your own. Work over the conversation until you can fairly hear your friend speaking, and make sure that your own replies are equally in character.

2. Use friends or acquaintances for subjects in writing dialogue for the following situations: (a) a

man of fifty has his house robbed and hurries to the police station to report it. Give his conversation with the desk sergeant; (b) a girl of twenty tells a friend about a party she has attended the night before; (c) an elderly woman in a small town tells a neighbor about "that strange little Mrs. Brown."

3. In all dialogue exercises at first the student will do well to restrict himself to persons he actually knows and make no attempt to create character as well as dialogue. When he is able to produce dialogue, perfectly in character, for persons he knows well, he is ready to proceed toward actual creating of character. (See Illustrative Suggestions at the end of Chapter VIII.)

4. In practicing narrative writing the student should remember that the whole basis of its effectiveness consists in setting up in the mind of his reader a vivid picture. To create this, nouns must be chosen which describe accurately or imaginatively; adjectives must be selected which qualify graphically; verbs must be found which make the story move pictorially. To illustrate simply: "coupé" is more descriptive than "automobile" because it immediately sets up a restricted picture in the reader's mind, whereas "automobile" allows a choice of several general types. "Luxurious" is a more suggestive adjective to use with "coupé" than "large," since it suggests soft cushions, spaciousness, perhaps a chauffeur, while "large" suggests nothing more than size. "Ran" is less vivid in describing the car's movement than "sped"; if you qualify this verb with "silently" you have a simple, but graphic picture: "The luxurious coupé sped silently . . ."

5. Any number of exercises like the foregoing may



be devised by the student, but a more practical method will be simply to vivify the stories upon which he is already working, checking over sentences and substituting imaginative words for the static ones. From careful, constant practice of this sort a fresh, vivid style will develop.

6. In writing do not attempt to be consciously "literary." Attempt rather to be graphic. Style changes with the years and what was considered good in 1870, for example, would be affected to-day. In your graphic style, developed to near perfection, you will find the "literary" touch of to-day.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CHARACTER

IN the short story there is no *development* of character in the sense that an actor has one point of view when the story begins and another when the story ends because of the play of his own mind, of circumstances, or of other actors upon him. An actor begins the story as a man whose life is governed by a basic characteristic. Through the story the same basic characteristic continues to govern and, as the climax approaches and must be met, the actor's decision is based firmly upon this characteristic. But the end of the story shows no appreciable change in character from the actor as he was introduced in the first paragraph. There has been no *development*.

This statement requires some word of justification before launching into a discussion of the important task of *setting* an actor's character. Short-story themes are best selected and developed by a modification of the old Greek rule of three — unity of time, place, and action. The best short stories are usually those which stretch over the shortest space of time. If all of the action can be crammed into a day, so much the better. If it takes two, three, four days, a week, a month, several months, even,

these are periods which the story can handle comfortably and convincingly. But the short story should not *impress its reader* as having extended over a long period of time.

Now this limitation is based directly upon the fact that short-story chief actors do not suffer changes of character. Over a considerable period, some development is inevitable. A sufficient number of circumstances would have faced a man in, say, two years to alter his point of view, sometimes considerably, sometimes only a little, but the development is there nevertheless. The chances are that the basic characteristic, which governs the chief actor's life in the crucial situation covered by the story, may not continue to dominate with the natural alterations in circumstances over a long period of time. The reader instinctively senses this possibility and begins to doubt the proof which the author is presenting. In other words, the story has lost some of its convincing quality.

A corollary reason for confining the action to as brief a period as possible is the fact that the short story represents a crucial situation in the chief actor's life. Obviously, this crucial situation will not continue indefinitely. The author has assured his reader that the chief actor faces a situation which must be dealt with as quickly as possible. The reader will hardly believe that such a crisis can be tolerated for long by a man interesting enough to read about. If the



crisis lasts too long, it is quite fair to assume that it is no longer a crisis—the suspense drops and with it the story's potentialities for holding the attention of its audience.

The short story should always give the impression that its chief actor, since he faces a crucial situation, is engrossed in it to the exclusion of all other interests. To hold this impression it is necessary to exclude long intervals of time. Time lapses covered by an unrevealing "Two years later" are not effective in the short story, for during that time any man should have been interested in half a dozen different things. The intensity of interest which is so necessary a part of the impression the chief actor should give is, therefore, lost. If a considerable lapse of time seems inevitable, then it is probable that the author has not properly laid out his plot. Presumably he has picked up the threads of his story too early and has not waited to introduce the chief actor until he was well aware of the crucial situation which he faced.

Unity of time is important then; unity of place is also desirable if not quite so necessary. It is hardly desirable, of course, to confine a short story's action to a single room. But it is helpful to the story's effectiveness if too wide contrasts in background are avoided. To place one scene in New York City and the next one in Honolulu introduces a certain dif-

fuseness which detracts from the reader's absorption in watching the actors against a certain established background. To move one's actors from Manhattan to Long Island requires no readjustment upon the part of the reader; but to move them long distances across land and sea lessens the story's intensity.

Unity of action is likewise an essential of the proper short-story theme. This entire study has stressed it inferentially and the subject requires no further elucidation here. Obviously, unity of action is inherent in the conception of the short story as the solution of a pressing problem by the chief actor. All of his thoughts are concentrated upon the solution. Therefore, there can be no action extraneous to this solution. Unity of action is maintained as a matter of course.

All of these matters depend directly upon the chief actor's remaining the sort of man he has been painted at his introduction. But because no real development in character takes place, it must not be thought that the author may neglect to paint clear, incisive portraits of the chief actor and minor actors. It is worth while inquiring somewhat into the formulas for *setting character*, that is, fixing in the reader's mind the impression of the actors which the author wishes him to have.

Earlier chapters have stressed the necessity for simplifying this impression in order that the

reader will be given his picture as quickly and as clearly as possible. Introduction and emphasis of the basic characteristic mark the first step in this process of simplification so far as the chief actor is concerned. But chief actor and minor actors are impressed most successfully by a careful use of what may be called *character tags*.

Persons with whom one is familiar usually have quite unimportant mannerisms which nevertheless impress themselves so strongly that they are recalled whenever the person in question is remembered. The president of the Farmers and Drovers National Bank has an odd way of wrinkling his nose when engrossed upon a column of figures; Thomas, the grocer, adopts his most familiar pose when standing with the fingers of both hands thrust in his hip pockets; Aunt Carrie always examines newcomers suspiciously over the rims of her spectacles; young Bond, just home from college, clicks his heels and bends forward ceremoniously at an introduction; Francis bears the scar upon his cheek of a bayonet encounter during the war; Jones has a lock of hair which the barber always cuts a bit too short and which he is constantly smoothing back in place. All of these idiosyncrasies, physical characteristics, habits, group themselves under the general head of *character tags*. Carrying the point a step further, mannerisms of speech are likewise grouped



in this category. A peculiar way of speaking, the constant repetition of a word or phrase, an odd inflection — all of these make of an unknown actor a living, speaking individual.

The author must create actors who live as vividly before the reader as they might if seen upon a stage. This is not an inconsiderable task, and its accomplishment is too often neglected by the inexperienced writer. Either he sees his actors so plainly himself that he forgets his reader has no faint idea of their appearance, their character, their mannerisms, beyond what is revealed in the narrative itself, or he himself lacks a clear impression of them. But whatever the cause of the deficiency it must be remedied if the actors are to live, and character tags offer the simplest means of accomplishing this end. If the author shows a chief actor rubbing his nose meditatively once and then shows him repeating the gesture, he begins to sketch in a man who is differentiated from other men about him by that one motion. If an actor seems to use a single expletive repeatedly, the reader begins to associate the word or phrase with him, to remember it as part of that individual actor. Thrown in casually these character tags are somewhat apt to be lost. They should be emphasized and emphasized again. For example, the chief actor, Mary, is in conversation with the minor actor, John:

"See here," said John excitedly. Mary remembered that he had used the phrase on that well-cherished night two weeks before. She wondered if he always used it.

The reader, following Mary's thoughts, notes it, too, and will recall it when John uses it later in the story. It serves to fix him in mind. It is, just as the descriptive phrase implies, a "tag" by which to remember him.

Character tags must, of course, be carefully used. John will not introduce each speech with "See here," nor will the other actor rub his nose meditatively through the story. But repetition of these mannerisms should be sought from time to time as the surest means of setting and holding character.

The modern short story no longer concerns itself with minute descriptions of its chief actor or minor actors unless there is something particularly significant in their appearance. If an actor is strongly in contrast, both in dress and manner, with the other actors in the story, then this contrast should be impressed by greater detail. But if an actor is — and this is the case with ninety per cent of the *dramatis personæ* of the short-story world — not greatly different from other men and women of his particular class and environment, then the writer need be interested only in attaching to him a character tag which will single him out just enough to make of him an individual.

Another factor of no small importance in setting a character is the choice of the actor's name. The fashion has now departed of baptizing one's actors with such descriptive cognomens as Sir Toby Belch and Mrs. Malaprop. But names are highly suggestive tags. In a novel one might give an actor a peculiar name and spend two hundred pages in justifying it. In a short story where no such study is possible, it is well to choose names which assist in creating the impression of an actor which the author desires to give. For example, if the actor is a young fellow, in college, and typical of his age, it will probably be wise to give him something which lends itself to a nickname. If the chief actor is an older man, serious, a person who commands respect, a name which suggests such a person should be chosen. The same direction holds for women actors. The name assists in creating the impression of a small girl, a tall girl, a laughing girl, an austere girl. Its significance should be carefully studied before the decision is made.

Dialogue is, of course, the most revealing means of picturing an actor. Its uses in this direction were partly discussed in the last chapter, but it may be well here to enlarge somewhat upon the particular part it plays in revealing character. When one listens to a person's speech, not only the words, but their quality, the accent, the inflection, the speed with which



they are spoken, make their impression. With the written word, however, only the words themselves can make their effect, with such narrative tags as the author chooses to describe their delivery. It is of the greatest importance, therefore, that each bit of dialogue be carefully chosen to convey the most accurate and consistent impression of the actor who speaks it.

Too often in the stories of inexperienced writers there is little if any differentiation between the utterances of different actors. Take away the narrative tags and the reader would be puzzled to decide just which actor was speaking. Obviously, this is a failure to take advantage of one's major opportunities. In so far as it is possible, each speech should strike a note which builds up a cumulative impression in the reader's mind of the actor speaking. The final test is to remove the narrative tags and still leave no doubt of the speaker's identity. An application of the character tag to dialogue is invaluable in this connection — John's "See here." Still, the author can hardly equip each of his actors with such a distinctive phrase since the device becomes too obvious when overworked. But each actor should have a sufficiently distinctive manner of speaking so that the *contrast* is apparent and the reader will immediately recognize him.

The answer to all this is a carefully thought

out picture of each actor in the author's mind. How tall is he? Handsome, or quite ordinary in appearance? Careful or careless of his dress? Well educated or poorly? Dark hair or light? Does he speak precisely or loosely, thoughtfully or carelessly? These are some of the purely external considerations which would appear in a moment's personal meeting. Yet often even such casual information is absent from the stories of inexperienced writers, which suggests that the author's own impression is not definitely formed. And unless a fairly accurate picture of the actor is in the author's mind when he writes, how is he to give to the speech of that actor an individual cast?

Each of the details which contributes to the reader's impression of an actor should be selected in such a way that it plays a part in building up a consistent impression. An actor will not be made attractive or unattractive merely by the word. Every detail should be chosen to conform with the desired picture. Every speech should emphasize it. The actor's height, his carriage, his whole attitude should be stressed to aid the desired impression. The necessity for this may be simply illustrated by the example of the romantic story in which the chief actor's problem is to induce a reciprocal feeling of affection in the heart of some young lady. Besides making the chief actor himself an attractive person who can be im-

aged without great difficulty as turning a young girl's heart, the girl herself must be made appealing enough so that the reader can justify the chief actor's affection. One cannot imagine any one's being in love with a girl who is wooden in every respect, whose speech has no charm, whose personality is singularly negative, and whose whole attitude seems rather vague and blurred until she suddenly comes into full focus to say "Yes." In such a case the reader is certain to be sadly disappointed in the story. Analyzed, his disappointment is found to be based upon the author's failure to justify his chief actor's reactions. An attractive young man, it might be supposed, would be interested only in an attractive young girl.

This justification of the actor's movements and emotions through a convincing picture of his own appearance and character is a consideration which should never be forgotten. Naturally it depends wholly upon the author's visualizing the person he desires his reader to see. If this picture is safely set up in his own mind, there is more than a fair chance that it will be translated to the reader. If it is never clearly established in the author's mind, it will require something more than chance to wedge it into the story. The only sure course for the author is to build up his own impression first and then test every speech and every detail of his actor's appearance by it. The author has



told his reader that the chief actor is a certain type of person. It is his task to make sure that every possible detail aids this impression. "Would the chief actor, being the sort of man he is, say just that?" he should ask. "Would he be likely to appear as he does in scene three?" The story reaches its maximum effectiveness only when such questions can be answered in an undeniable affirmative.

### ILLUSTRATIVE SUGGESTIONS

1. The ability to create character realistically is largely a matter of practice and development. Primarily it depends upon seeing and knowing your actors as well as you know your best friends. In the beginning it is well to use a purely mechanical method of fixing the essentials in your mind. You will discard it, of course, as you develop, but it will serve to fix in its proper proportions the outline which you should fill in for each actor.

Suppose, for example, the chief actor of your story to be a girl of twenty, unmarried, living in Des Moines, Iowa. Write down the following bits of information about her: (*a*) her name; (*b*) her height; (*c*) color of her eyes; (*d*) color of her hair and whether long or short; (*e*) her parents: what sort of people are they? (*f*) her home: is it attractive, pleasant? (*g*) is the girl vivacious, sparkling, pretty, beautiful? or is she languid, stodgy, unemotional, plain? (*h*) is she athletic? does she play golf or tennis? (*i*) is she artistic? (*j*) fond of parties? (*k*) in love? (*l*) has she traveled? (*m*) has she been away at school? (*n*) is she going to college? (*o*) does she dress herself attractively? (*p*) does she look forward to

marriage? or to a career? (*q*) is her voice pleasant? does she speak descriptively, entertainingly? (*r*) does she enjoy motoring? (*s*) does she like her home town or want to leave it for a larger city? (*t*) what characteristic of voice, appearance, has she which is particularly noticeable?

2. There is no more practical means of developing character-building proficiency than by filling in similar outlines. Naturally, the end in view is to fix in the student's mind a fairly accurate idea of what he must tell his readers in order that they may see his actors as he does. The next step is to make these actors speak, and the exercises suggested in the Illustrative Suggestions for Chapter VII will help.

3. With the list of details given above in mind, see how many of them are included in three typical magazine stories. Make a list of the details actually found and see how easily you can supply from the impression given by the author those which are suggested but not actually listed.

4. In any stories which you may have written, check your characterization by the detailed list. See how much of what you have in mind about your actor actually has found a place in the story. Often an author may have fairly well in mind the character he wishes to transfer to the reader, but necessary details of the picture are not infrequently omitted.

## CHAPTER IX

### TYPES OF NARRATION

A SHORT story may be written either in the first or in the third person. In the first case, it is told by a person who plays the rôle of chief actor, either as an observer or as the real protagonist — an “I”; in the second, it is told by some indeterminate person — the author, of course — in which case the narrator does not appear as an actor: the story merely “happens.” The majority of stories are written in the third person because this is the most natural form. There are themes, however, which seem to lend themselves better to first-person narration and this manual would hardly be complete without a discussion of the method.

To begin with, there are two types of first-person narration. In the first, the chief actor-narrator — the “I” — plays an active part in the episodes of the story just as does the chief actor in a third-person story, and the method differs little from that pursued in third-person narration. The chief actor must be characterized as fully, given a basic characteristic, a problem, and carried through to the solution of it. Naturally, in this case the story *must* report only those things which “I” can know, and there is no danger of the author’s failing to preserve



a unity of focus throughout. Everything is seen through his eyes and heard through his ears.

But there is one important difference between this type of story and third-person narration. In the latter form, however vividly the chief actor is before the reader at all times, it is the author who performs the narration. The chief actor speaks only when dialogue is introduced. The paragraphs of narration which carry the story are not cast in his individual speech. In the first-person narrative, however, all of the story is told by the chief actor. Dialogue and narrative passages as well are reported in his peculiar idiom. The entire story, then, must reflect the personality of the chief actor. Obviously, this both imposes more limitations and grants greater freedom than does the third-person method. It is easier, for example, to set the character of minor actors by the simple expedient of having the chief actor tell what he thinks about them. There is now no necessity for the author to remain in the background, for author and chief actor are one. Presumably this chief actor is an interesting fellow with a descriptive way of speaking. If he lacks that, the story had best be told in the third person. Nothing is worse than a long tale by a bore. The primary requirement of the chief actor in a first-person story is that he shall have an interesting person-

ality and an interesting, even racy, manner of speaking.

A study of magazine fiction reveals that this type of first-person story is rather more often chosen for humorous than for serious subjects. Perhaps because few persons like to hear a woeful tale of personal hardship from the lips of the unfortunate, this first-person story is coming more and more to be connected with the lighter sort of thing. Most of the stories in which slang plays a large part use this method because it gives an opportunity to maintain the same idiom, not only in dialogue, but in the narrative passages as well.

The second type of first-person story makes its chief actor an observer rather than an active participant. Its technique requires a slightly different approach and adds another figure to the cast. Besides the chief actor and minor actors, this type of story must have a *leading actor*. The illusion of this second first-person story is of a delightful raconteur, seated in his comfortable library, unfolding to the reader an interesting sequence of events which he once had the good fortune to observe. The unity of focus is maintained through this raconteur — the “I” of the story — who is the chief actor. As he unfolds his tale, he introduces the *leading actor* who is to usurp the part which the chief actor would normally play in third-person narration or in the first type of first-person nar-

ration. The chief actor, who tells the story, has only *observed* the events which make up his story or, at most, played a minor part in them. The leading actor was the protagonist throughout. Therefore, the problem is given to the leading actor, as is the basic characteristic, and the story which the raconteur tells is the leading actor's solution of his problem. The focus of the story, however, is never directed through the leading actor's consciousness. The stream of action always flows through the chief actor-raconteur.

The story differs from the first type in that the raconteur rarely reveals himself in the particular setting chosen for telling the story. The reader must imagine his own setting for the telling; the chief actor does not help him out. In the other type, of course, the chief actor places himself in his own setting, just as the author in a third-person story would have placed the chief actor. But in the second type of first-person story, the scene of the narration is usually indefinite.

As in the first type of first-person story, all of the narrative parts are reported in the words of the chief actor. They are not, of course, quoted, because that would mean inclosing the entire story in quotation marks. What actually happens is that the "I" of the story becomes, in fact, the author, and since the author of a third-person story would hardly inclose all



of his narrative passages or descriptive bits within quotation marks, so the raconteur of the first-person story finds it unnecessary. And yet the fact that a definite person — and not a quite impersonal author — is telling the story, imposes the necessity of keeping these narrative passages always suggestive of the raconteur's character. Although he apparently characterizes himself but little, a definite impression of him should arise from his way of speaking and the comments he chooses to make.

Most of this, however, is purely inferential characterization. If one were to stand hidden behind a screen listening to a story being told on the other side with no view of the speaker and only such information about him as he himself might reveal through his speech and his comments, one would nevertheless gain a very distinct picture of him. Without being told that he was tall or short, young or old, city bred or country bred, most of these things would obtrude. Each listener might not have an identical impression — probably would not — but each listener would have some definite idea in his own mind. It is this sort of impression which the reader should gain of the chief actor-raconteur. He need give about himself only those details which would explain his witnessing the engrossing events he describes. Any great amount of personal detail

would not be important to the reader's understanding of the story, and besides, it might leave an unpleasant impression of gross egotism about the chief actor which would be detrimental to the reader's enjoyment. After all, if one were telling a story to an unfamiliar audience, one would hardly say: "I am fifty years of age, was born in New York City of a family socially prominent for generations, and have spent the major portion of my life cruising about the world in my yacht. I am really a delightful sort of chap with iron gray hair, deep brown eyes — somewhat piercing, I believe — and I am known as a delightful raconteur." All of these things the reader will gather incidentally from the hints in the chief actor's comments and his manner of speaking. Naturally it is quite important that this chief actor be an interesting fellow in order that his story may be properly told. But the facts about him should be inferred from his speech rather than told outright.

This type of first-person narrative has one major advantage over the other types of short-story narration: it may deal convincingly with greater periods of time and far more abrupt changes of scene. Although the unity of place should not be violated too greatly, it is quite possible to violate the unity of time without destroying the interest of the story. The chief actor-*raconteur* himself is primarily responsible

for this added scope. In third-person narration, impersonally given by an author, there is nothing which binds the story together except the focus of interest upon the chief actor's solution of his problem. But in this type of first-person story, the reader is listening to a man who talks entertainingly. He is quite willing to listen while somewhat longer periods of time are bridged. Nor is it so difficult for these time gaps to be covered by a definite personality. The chief actor shades them over — states that for two years while he was cruising about the South Seas he failed to run across this interesting fellow whose story he is telling. Perhaps there is a further detail or two which serves quickly to give the reader an action bridge to cover the gap. And then the threads of the story are picked up once more; the reader has no great sense of wondering what has happened to the leading actor in the interim, for the chief actor is able to hold his interest by his charm.

This second type of first-person short story is best adapted to stories of unusual or bizarre plot — stories which might be difficult to tell in straight, impersonal third-person narration, but which, when illuminated by the skillful touch of a personal narrator in the chief actor's rôle, acquire heightened interest. It is also of value in another type of story: that in which the chief actor is necessarily a person for whom



the author would have difficulty in awakening sympathy upon the part of the reader. No chief actor is successful in his appeal unless the author can make the reader sympathetic to some degree with the solution of his problem. Yet there are cases in which it is impossible to awaken sympathy and still give the chief actor the character he must have in order to make the story successful. Two alternative courses then face the author: he may choose another actor for the chief rôle and make the first a minor actor, keeping third-person narration; or he may draw in an observer to tell the story — change it to first-person narration and make the actor who seems devoid of sympathetic appeal the leading actor.

It should be stated here, however, that in the great majority of cases, third-person narration is more effective than first. The latter should not be chosen unless the author is thoroughly convinced that his plot cannot be effectively dramatized otherwise. The materials should be studied from all angles to make sure that no other actor may be successfully cast for the rôle of chief actor. Only when an impasse has been reached is it wise to decide upon first-person narration.

There are two main types of third-person narration: *personal* and *impersonal*. Then there is a third, somewhat hybrid type of what is really third-person narration known as the

*story-within-a-story.* This third type requires a distinctly artificial sort of construction and is rarely effective, but since it is occasionally employed, it may be well to explain it here.

For example, a casual group of men is seated in the lounge of a club, chatting over after-dinner coffee and cigars. The talk centers upon one of them who has just returned from a month's big-game hunting in Africa. "Yes," he is saying, as the curtain rises upon the scene, "I talked with a number of white men and dozens of natives out there about the old story that an elephant never forgets a kindness. There's not a thing in it, they all say." The hunter is very emphatic—almost belligerently so. "I know that Akerson, the famous big-game hunter, has a lot to say about it," he continues, "but I'd like to wager that he's just picked up the story somewhere himself, and sticks to it because it makes a good yarn." There is a momentary lull in the conversation, and then a quiet little man on the outer fringe of the circle speaks up. "Pardon me, sir," he says, somewhat apologetically, "but I've been out in Africa a bit myself. Seen an elephant or two in my day, too. Akerson is quite right, and I think I can prove it." Whereupon the little man launches into a story which substantiates the theory that elephants indeed remember kindnesses.

To turn now from a discussion of the ex-

ample to the construction, the group scene forms the beginning of the story, and when the inner story is begun by the quiet little man, it introduces the body of the story as a whole. The entire body is taken up with this inner story which is, in reality, a simple short story in itself. At no point in the story, however, is there a chief actor. The author throws his spotlight over the entire group at the beginning, usually centering it upon a man who is *not* to be the raconteur of the inner story. This man who receives the spotlight is by no means the chief actor. The reader, instead of visualizing the beginning through the eyes of a chief actor whose character he vicariously assumes for the duration of the story, takes up a position on the fringe of the circle, looking on as the conversation moves from one man to another in the group. Unlike his place in the ordinary third-person narration in the consciousness of the chief actor, his position in this type of construction is quite removed from all the actors. He takes up a post where he can see them all, but he is never intimately connected with any.

The original situation is simplicity itself and requires a minimum of exposition. For it is the inner story upon which the reader's attention will be focused. In so far as the beginning is concerned, this group is a chance congregation of men after dinner at a club. They are not particular friends; some of them may even



be strangers, introduced into the club temporarily by members who chance to be absent at the moment the story begins. The author makes the reader merely an onlooker at the scene. The lives of none of these men are particularly important so far as the reader is concerned. In fact, it is to the author's purpose to keep their identities concealed. None of them is to be the chief actor, so the reader need become immersed in the character of none. He does not need to ask more from the group than that it allow him to look on, listening to the conversation. The author's only task, then, in this first scene, is to suggest by a descriptive touch here and there an impression of the group as a whole and of such speakers in particular as are important to the action.

Almost always the talk turns to some such generalization as that quoted above. The quiet little man in the background speaks up, and the story he tells is a proof or disproof of the generalization. Notice that up to this point, there has been no problem introduced, unless the task of proving the generalization can be looked upon as a problem. It is, in a way, but not in the sense that it is a crucial, vital problem such as faces the chief actor in the usual type of third-person narration.

In the inner story, however, a problem appears, and this narration is constructed exactly in the manner of the ordinary short story with

beginning, body, and ending. This may appear at first sight to make it first-person narration. Actually, however, it is not; rather, it is a series of long quotations—extended dialogue. Throughout this inner story the author keeps the reader's attention focused upon the raconteur's narrative, but he also makes the reader conscious of the group which is listening. This original scene is never shut out. There are periodical flashbacks to it, usually introduced through the raconteur. For example:

"We left Candoza about evening on the third day. You know Candoza, of course, sir?" the little man asked, turning to his adversary.

The big man, quite evidently still annoyed at this unassuming fellow, nodded shortly. "Of course," he said.

"I was sure you would remember," said the little man as though relieved, and continued.

The raconteur of this inner story never becomes a chief actor in the accepted sense of the word, again because of the author's purpose which will develop later. He is a *leading actor*, but not a *chief actor*, for the reader never enters his consciousness, never sees the story through his eyes. Maintaining his point of vantage behind the circle, the reader listens with the others. He knows no more and no less about the raconteur than do the other men in the group. This is, indeed, a story which is being

told — not one which happens before the eyes of the reader.

The reason for keeping the reader with the other listeners from knowing the raconteur as a chief actor is inherent in the author's design for the ending. This type of construction is usually brought to a close with the *surprise ending*. Now the surprise ending merely implies that the dénouement is not at all what the reader might have expected. Both reader and other actors are supposedly astonished by the turn of events, and the reader is expected to be much pleased, his satisfaction increased by this unusual twist. The surprise ending, properly justified by hints in the preceding action of the story and not made too obvious, is indeed pleasing and effective. But too often it is not justified or is quite obvious from what has gone before and in such cases it is a deficiency rather than an asset. The surprise ending should grow out of hints sprinkled through the story — unobtrusive hints, to be sure, but hints none the less. Its effect should be to make the reader reason, after he has finished the story, that had he noted those hints as he came across them he would surely have guessed the dénouement. That he failed to note them merely adds to his enjoyment and his admiration for the author's subtlety. The surprise ending should never be employed unless it is thoroughly justified in the preceding action.



The reason for this is simply that the reader has a right to know all of the facts which might enable him to guess the *dénouement* if he took advantage of the hints given. If there are no such hints, he has no way of guessing: the author has deliberately led him on — under false pretenses. And it should be remembered that the short-story writer is the soul of honor. Although he may lead his reader off on what appear to be false clues, when the story is finished the fair-minded reader will always realize that he would have seen through these clues to what lay behind had he only used his wits a bit more.

But to go back to the sort of surprise ending which usually concludes the story-within-a-story. Using the example introduced above, the ending will go somewhat like this:

“And I suppose you think that one story proves the rule?” demanded the big man.

“Not necessarily,” replied the little man, unruffled. “I could cite others.”

“Hm,” sneered the other. “Just why should you think your word is better than mine? Any one would think you were Akerson himself.”

“Thank you,” said the little man evenly, rising abruptly and sauntering out of the room.

The others looked after him curiously as another man entered from the far door. “Hello,” said the newcomer. “Akerson gone? I saw him telling a story and I didn’t want . . . I say, what’s the matter?”

This type of ending is almost a necessity if

there is anything to be said by the group which has listened other than "Well, well, that does prove it, doesn't it?" or "Is that so?" In order to justify at all the story-within-a-story construction, the ending must affect either an actor in the inner story or the raconteur or one of the other members of the group in the club. Otherwise there is no excuse for employing this type of construction. And by the time the ending is reached the reader is usually fairly certain of the dénouement. In the example cited, Akerson's name is brought up by the big man and, as every short-story reader knows, the mention of any name should be looked upon as significant. That is one of the hints justifying the surprise ending. Presumably in the story-within-a-story the raconteur has given other hints which make the reader guess that he is Akerson himself. Yet when the dénouement discloses his identity, the other actors in the group must, of course, appear astonished by this entirely unlooked-for turn of events. More often than not their astonishment serves to disappoint the reader. Being supposedly intelligent fellows, he reasons, they should have figured all this out if I could. Their astonishment does not ring true, and the reader feels the ending to have fallen very flat indeed.

This device of the story-within-a-story is rarely successful and should be avoided by the

inexperienced writer. Even in the hands of an experienced craftsman it is all too often artificial and ineffective. A careful discussion of its technique has been included here to prepare for the few opportunities when it is really the logical method of presentation.

Of the two normal types of third-person narration, *personal* and *impersonal*, the latter is by far the most frequently employed and the most natural method. To dramatize the rather cold word, "impersonal," one might call it "motion-picture operator" narration since in employing it the author acts as little more than the operator of the projecting machine in a motion-picture theater—throwing the action upon a screen without comment or explanation. He is not a raconteur whose skill at narration would make even the slightest plot dramatic. He does not appear to be a raconteur at all. He simply throws the image of a chief actor against a certain setting on the screen and seems to let him shift for himself through the various episodes of the story.

But if the impersonal method of narration may be likened to the usual presentation of a motion-picture without comment or interpretation, the *personal* method may be likened to the showing of a motion picture in Japan. There an interpreter and translator stands beside the screen, explaining the action as it goes along and, it usually happens, not explaining impersonally,



but interpreting events on the screen in his own way, shading them by his own point of view. The motion picture uninterpreted is one thing; but interpreted and seen through the mind of a skillful translator it may acquire very definite shades of meaning. By way of illustrating these types of narration, consider the two paragraphs below, the first written in the personal style, the second in the impersonal style:

1. Even John Appleby's best friend would never have suspected him of generosity. Every one said that. In fact, Caleb Dresser who, besides owning the largest grocery store in Carso, Indiana, happened indeed to be John Appleby's best friend, freely confessed that, far from suspecting it, he would have denied the possibility vehemently had he not seen the evidence with his own eyes. "And I had my glasses on, too," he added, as though the admission of these props to clear vision left no doubt of the rumor's truth. Yet John himself, when confronted by the editor of the Carso *Intelligencer*, who had seen the subscription list of the new hospital with \$1,000 written after the bold signature of John Appleby, readily admitted the fact and seemed annoyed that his action should have occasioned any flutter among Carso's citizens. But John, so Caleb Dresser explained, was like that. He probably had good and sufficient reasons best known to himself.

2. John Appleby looked up shortly from the desk marked "President" behind the inner railing of the Carso National Bank.

"Mornin'," he answered curtly to the greeting of the *Intelligencer's* editor and continued with his business. John had no time for conversation during

banking hours. He was absorbed once more in his figures as the other observed cautiously: "I see where you're givin' a thousand dollars to the new hospital, John," and stood expectantly poised, waiting the effect of his bombshell on Carso's richest and meanest man.

The pencil in John Appleby's hand stopped its traveling up and down a column for a brief moment, its point poised over the figure 6. "Well, what of it?" he demanded sharply, fixing steely eyes upon his too genial visitor.

The editor fumbled for a moment, looked down at his unpolished shoes, and then muttered: "Oh, nothin', John, nothin'. I just thought there might have been somethin' in it for the paper."

"There wasn't," snapped the other shortly, and turned back again to his desk. But the pencil remained still for a moment, its point poised over the figure 6. The column blurred while John Appleby indulged in the rare luxury of abstraction.

In the first of these two paragraphs the author himself appears to have taken a hand in the story. John Appleby is the chief actor and when the story gets properly under way he will definitely overshadow the others and clear up the slight doubt remaining in the reader's mind at the end of the introductory paragraph as to which of the actors introduced is to be the chief actor. But the original situation is *explained* somewhat more than *shown* and explained in such a way as to color it in accordance with the author's definite point of view. In other words, there is an interpretation of the facts.

One feels, upon analysis, that the author may be reporting things *as he sees them* — not as they actually happened.

In the second paragraph, impersonal narration simply throws upon the screen before the reader a scene in the Carso National Bank. John Appleby is there; the editor of the *Intelligencer* is there. The author allows the original situation to explain itself through Chief Actor Appleby rather than explaining it himself. Excepting for a broad hint of John's basic characteristic he has given the reader no explanation of the effect which the chief actor's subscription to the new hospital has had upon Carso's citizenry. The reader gains no impression of an author telling the story — the story tells itself. It is acted before the reader upon a stage or screen. The style is unobtrusive. In fact, with impersonal narration, the reader should gain no impression of style at all. Absorbed in the chief actor and in the stream of action, he is carried along without the sensation of reading words upon the printed page.

In personal narration, however, the reader is distinctly conscious of the author and of his style. Usually this type of narration is most successful in humorous stories, or, like the second type of first-person narration, in stories with unusual plots — plots which gain something from being shaded by the temperament



of the narrator. In this type the reader is given facts definitely colored by a point of view. For example, the author regards his chief actor humorously, indulgently, perhaps. The chief actor's foibles he looks upon with an amused smile and the smile is quite apparent as he discloses the chief actor to the reader. Perhaps personal narration is most effective when just this impression is desired: when, for example, a chief actor is chosen who, although quite serious himself, should be taken with a grain of salt by the reader. Although the chief actor is deadly serious in all of his acts, the reader would like to smile a bit at him, losing not one whit of sympathy for him in the process, but regarding him rather more fondly for it. With this type of narration the reader is rather literally playing the rôle of chief actor instead of becoming, vicariously, the chief actor himself. In such a case he may thoroughly enjoy the rôle — laugh at it a bit if he wishes — an indulgence denied him with impersonal narration in which he must be quite as serious as the chief actor.

By adopting personal narration for a story whose chief actor should be regarded somewhat indulgently, the chief actor appears in a far more entertaining light. Although the reader observes the stream of action through the chief actor's consciousness and the unity of focus is in no sense violated, he nevertheless realizes

that all of this is not entirely serious. Impersonal narration of the same theme would have something of the effect of an actor upon the stage who was forced to play the buffoon without realizing that his part was amusing.

For the great majority of plots, however, impersonal narration is best, particularly in the case of the inexperienced writer. For personal narration is effective only when the writer has developed his own capabilities sufficiently to carry his reader along with the pure charm of his style. Until charm of style has become a fact rather than a pious hope, impersonal narration is not only safer but far more effective.

Interestingly enough, impersonal narration shows the modern short story in its latest development. Most of the short stories of the nineteenth century are cast in the personal mold — in most of them one feels the definite personality of the narrator. The history of short fiction from its earliest beginnings betrays an almost consistent use of personal rather than impersonal narration. Yet the majority of short stories require no shading by the author's temperament in order to reach their highest effectiveness and, in fact, are likely to lose dramatic interest through being *narrated* rather than having their action simply shown to the reader upon a stage or screen. For the deficiency of the personally narrated story — whether told in the first or

in the third person — is that it moves more slowly than the impersonal form. Nothing which is told can achieve the swiftness of action itself. And the ideal of the short story is movement.

In humorous stories, and occasionally in the story of bizarre plot, a slower tempo is possible. In this case personal narration adds rather than detracts from the effectiveness. Although it moves more slowly the style itself carries the story along. Perhaps the test, if one were needed to decide whether personal or impersonal narration should be employed, is best applied to the problem which the chief actor is to solve. Every short story concerns a crucial situation in the life of its chief actor, but sometimes this situation is not a "life or death" matter. Although the less pressing problem must be solved as surely as the other, the reader is not so intent upon its solution as upon the way in which it is met — upon the interest which the author's presentation of the various episodes contributes. Such stories are usually possible subjects for personal narration, for they may move more slowly, and the author's charm in narration supplies what swiftness of movement would otherwise offer. But in the story whose chief actor plunges immediately toward the solution of a pressing problem and suspense holds the reader tense rather than merely entertained, impersonal narration is



more effective, more dramatic, and better calculated to grip the interest of the reader.

Impersonal narration has but a single danger: the possibility that the author, conceiving it as a cold presentation of fact without embellishment, may fail to dramatize sufficiently. There is far more to relating thrilling action effectively than placing declarative sentences in sequence. Every phrase, every word, every sentence must be tested for its effect. Drama is, of course, the imaginative presentation of a person or persons in conflict. The drama must be inherent in the action — in the situation — itself. But the portrayal of action dramatically requires painting a word picture of men and women in movement so vividly that their every gesture will be outlined clearly against the background. Action must move, else it is no action. The writer of the impersonal story must take care that in keeping out of the picture himself, he does not blur or soften its movement.

### ILLUSTRATIVE SUGGESTIONS

1. Familiarize yourself thoroughly with the types of narration discussed in this chapter. Find two examples of each and study their various differences as well as their effectiveness in treating different types of themes. Each type is particularly fitted for certain kinds of stories. For any stories which you may be working on or considering, weigh the merits of each narration type.

2. Take the beginning of a third-person story told in the personal style and rework it as an impersonal type.

3. Take a first-person story in which the chief actor plays the leading rôle and rework it as a third-person story done in the personal manner. In both this case, and in the exercise above, consider wherein the story has been altered in its thrust and effectiveness.

4. Write the beginning of a story upon which you are working in both the personal and the impersonal manner, and repeat the exercise until you are perfectly familiar with the limitations and possibilities of each.

5. Try a first-person beginning in each of the two styles. Here the contrast in effectiveness should be sharper. Depending upon its subject matter, the story should be far more effective in one form than in the other. With third-person narration it is sometimes rather more difficult to fix on the better method.

6. In his classes the author has found it valuable to have each of his students write a single story early in the term for use throughout the year as a test for various points of technique. Each student has, of course, been allowed entire freedom in his choice of theme. In shorter courses the author has directed his students to hand in the story in its three structural parts, beginning, middle, and ending. As a fourth assignment, the student has rewritten the story in accordance with the knowledge he has gained through lectures, classroom discussion and the author's personal criticism. This method has been found particularly successful in that it enables the student to concentrate upon making a single

story effective rather than allowing the knowledge he has gained to be diffused over several. For longer courses the author recommends the exercises outlined as part of the Illustrative Suggestions, wherever possible using the student's own story as well as magazine stories. The exercises are designed also as a particular aid to the student working without other instruction than is to be found in the text.



## CHAPTER X

### PREPARING AND MARKETING THE SHORT STORY

THE most important reader of a short story is the editor who passes upon its availability for his periodical. He reads from two or three to several dozen scripts in a day and it is little wonder that he likes to have them prepared in such a way that they may be read with a minimum disarrangement of his habits. So axiomatic has this become, in fact, that custom has developed rules for the preparation of scripts in accordance with a generalized editorial opinion of the most convenient form which the purely mechanical preparation of a short story should take.

First, of course, the short story *must* be typewritten. Most editors refuse to read handwritten scripts and with good reason. Second, the script should be double-spaced. Single-spaced copy is difficult to follow easily. Triple-spacing is somewhat less easy than double-spacing — perhaps because less familiar. Editors who must think of their space limitations judge the length of a story roughly by the number of double-spaced pages which it covers. Third, scripts should be typewritten on white paper, 8½ by 11 inches, the ordinary, full-

sheet size. Legal size paper, which measures  $8\frac{1}{2}$  by 13 inches, should be avoided. Any grade of paper, naturally, is quite acceptable. Any grade, that is, excepting the very thin, so-called onion skin which is not only likely to tear but becomes wrinkled easily. These three requirements are the hard and fast rules of manuscript preparation.

It is customary for the author to type his name and address in the upper left-hand corner of page one. It is not necessary to repeat the name and address upon subsequent pages. The title of the story should be placed in the center top of the first page, just above the first paragraph. It is hardly necessary to repeat the name of the author below it, although if a pseudonym is to be used, this is the place for it. Communications with regard to the manuscript will always be addressed to the person whose name appears in the upper left-hand corner.

In the upper right-hand corner the number of words in the story is sometimes placed. This is not necessary, but if it is done at all, the count should be accurate. It is of little value to an editor to read "3000 words" if he knows from the number of pages that the total must be nearly twice that number. Some writers also note in the upper right-hand corner, "First American serial rights only," "At your usual rates," or both. Neither of these

legends is necessary. If the story is accepted, there will be plenty of time to straighten out the rights which are being disposed of, and most magazines, unless there is a stipulation to the contrary, purchase only first American serial rights. If the author is still unrivied, he will usually be far happier to have his story published at all than to care whether he is receiving payment at "usual" rates or unusual ones. Most magazines have a fixed rate of payment excepting in the case of very well-known authors whose tremendous popularity makes it logical for them to receive more. The inexperienced writer may be sure that he is receiving fair treatment.

The only other essential to note about the arrangement of the script itself is that all pages succeeding the first should be numbered in the upper right-hand corner. If the author desires to clip his pages together so that they will not become disarranged, only clips which slip over the tops and do not punch through the pages should be used. It is difficult to hold a small manuscript whose pages are fastened tightly together and the editor will be better pleased if he can remove the clip immediately and read with the pages loose in his hands.

When the script is ready for mailing, it should be either inserted flat in a large envelope, or folded once, in the middle, and placed in a half-size envelope, or folded twice, up from the bot-



tom and down from the top, and placed in the ordinary large-size business envelope. If the script is long — of twenty pages or more and written on fairly heavy paper — it is better to use the full or the half-size envelope. But if it is fairly thin, it is advisable to use the large-size business envelope, folding twice. Under no circumstances should a manuscript be rolled and mailed in a tube. The writer will, of course, enclose a stamped and self-addressed envelope for reply or for the return of his manuscript if unavailable. Many editors make it a rule never to return manuscripts for which return postage has not been furnished.

In deciding just how to send off a script the most important point to bear in mind is the possible treatment it may receive in the mails. Shopworn manuscripts hardly present themselves to an editor in their most favorable light, and if the author must send out his script several times before eventually finding a market, it is best to safeguard its condition.

The envelope should be addressed either to "The Editor, Blank Magazine," or to "Blank Magazine, Editorial Department." Unless the writer is a personal friend of the editor and has been requested to submit his story, there is no advantage in addressing the editor by name, nor is there need for enclosing a letter to the editor. All magazines have regular channels through which each script is sent, and the

writer may be sure that the editor-in-chief will see it if the subordinates consider it available.

Perhaps this is a proper moment to silence the wail of the unsuccessful writer that his stories are not read by the magazine to which he sends them. There are several hundred fiction magazines in the United States and each of them would be quite as happy as the complaining writer if his stories suited its needs. One frequently hears the comment as a reader throws his magazine aside in disgust: "I could write a better story than that. He got it accepted only because he's famous." Perhaps. There are many stories in the magazines each month which hardly represent perfection. All of which is an indication that there are many more bad stories than good and not enough good stories to go round. No editor cares to hear deprecatory comments upon the stories in his magazine. But if it is a question of choosing between a bad story by a man whose name has a definite commercial value and a writer who is quite unknown and whose name is worth nothing, the choice will naturally fall upon the writer with the valuable name. Still, no editor can afford to overlook the possibility that every unknown writer is a potential gold mine. He may write one bad story, two bad stories, half a dozen of them, and then begin producing fiction which means increased circulation to the magazine fortunate enough to dis-

cover him. So the editor carries along reading the bad stories in the hope of striking the good.

Marketing stories is a business proposition which every writer must learn before he can hope for consistent sales. That it is so little understood, or heeded, is perhaps the fault of the "art for art's sake" doctrine which places the author, as an artist, above the commercial side of literature. There might be something in it if all authors — and all editors — were artists. The question is purely academic, for literature, like apples or wheat, has its quite definite commercial aspect. It requires specialized knowledge to grow good apples or good wheat, but the specialized knowledge is worth little if the grower has no idea of the ways and means of selling his crop. An apple-grower would hardly go far financially if he insisted upon sending his product to a market where only potatoes were bought and then bemoaned the fact that, although Blank down the road had no trouble in selling there, the market refused to buy his product. But the successful Blank, of course, had potatoes to sell.

Writer after writer who produces "apples" insists upon sending them to a market where only "potatoes" are bought. The analogy is not quite perfect, of course. The potato purchaser would undoubtedly inform the apple-grower that his refusal to buy implied no criticism of the apples themselves. It was only



that he, selling to people who bought only potatoes, could not possibly dispose of the apples, although they might be the best in the world. The editor of a magazine cannot take the time to explain that he is refusing the story, not because it is badly done, but because it is not his type of fiction. It is the author himself who must decide upon the sort of market which might be expected to buy his product before he wastes his own time and an editor's by sending it to impossible markets.

It has always been true, of course, that magazines address themselves to certain definite audiences. They visualize what their particular type of reader ought to like and search for stories which will fit in with this general plan. Perhaps in this day of myriad magazines the audiences are less easy to distinguish from the reader's and the writer's position outside the editorial circle. But they exist none the less. The writer who would sell successfully must study the magazines themselves in order to learn the general type of story which each displays.

There are perhaps not more than half a dozen, or at most ten possible markets for the average short story, for not more than that number of magazines will feel it to represent the type of fiction which their readers expect. A study of the fiction appearing in the various magazines should satisfy the writer as to which

program his story most closely approximates. If he sends it to each of the available markets and it is rejected by all, the assumption is a safe one that the story requires reworking.

It is a waste of time to take the contrary course and send it to magazines for which it is obviously unsuited. There are cases of stories having been rejected by a score of magazines only to be accepted on the twenty-first shot by a particularly good market. Authors are fond of recalling such experiences as proof that the best way to sell stories is to keep on sending them out. Yet undoubtedly a dozen of the twenty editors who rejected the much-traveled story recognized its merits immediately, but cast it aside as unsuitable for their particular audience. Their rejection did not imply that the story was bad in their various opinions. It was simply unsuited to their needs. The author who was rewarded in the end by having his story accepted would probably have been successful much sooner had he studied his markets and cast out the impossible ones.

Length is a particularly important consideration in a story's availability. Some magazines with no problems of intricate make-up can use stories of a thousand or of ten thousand words indiscriminately. But they are in the minority. Most editors have a fixed limit beyond which they cannot go. If that limit is five thousand words, they must reject arbi-

trarily stories appreciably longer which will not lend themselves to cutting.

Consistent rejection slips mean one of two deficiencies: poor marketing or poor stories. The first may be remedied by study; whether the second can depends upon the ability of the writer himself and the seriousness with which he goes about his work. And it *is* work. Short-story writing is a dangerous pastime for the man without an independent income. There are a few men and women with a peculiar flair for short stories who have achieved success without any particular effort. But for each of them there are a great many more who have worked quite as hard as any business executive to attain their success.

Not every one with a typewriter and a genius for hard work has the capability of becoming a good short-story writer. But for those who have the ability there is a simple road to success in writing, so obvious that it is often the least worry of the beginner: it is merely *to write*. The famous musician did not pick up a violin one day and find himself a genius; the famous painter did not seize brushes and contrive a masterpiece. Each of them learned his craft — spent hours over months and years perfecting his technique — learning to express himself in the art which he had chosen. Yet the short-story writer more often than not expects to sell his first story and each succeeding



story. Writing, like music and painting, is a craft which must be learned and one in which practice means increased facility of expression. No one becomes an artist until he knows the essentials of the craft which he would follow. Only when one learns *how* to achieve desired effects can one hope to soar above one's craft and become an artist.

Suppose the writer were to turn out a thousand words a day, little enough for a full day's work. At the end of a year he would have written 365,000 words, more than four full-length novels. Suppose he wrote but five hundred, there would still be 182,500 to his credit at the end of a year, better than two full-length novels. Nor would it matter greatly whether all of this effort was devoted to writing short stories alone. For the practice gained in writing and rewriting would increase the writer's facility of expression and the excellence of his style; whatever part of his writing time was concentrated upon short-story writing would definitely aid his ability to construct logical plots and effective short stories.

Perhaps some day the Inquiring Reporter will interview five unsuccessful writers and learn from them why they refuse to work at their craft excepting when something which they choose to call a "divine spark" moves them. Their replies would be interesting, if not particularly helpful to others. Probably they

would have something to say about "prostituting their art." And with such martyrs to art, little progress can be made. They will continue receiving rejection slips for the few products they turn out and continue to sneer at editors for their failure to know "Art" when they see it.

But for those writers who would succeed, it is best to remember that producing short stories is a profession which requires all the honest effort of any other profession. It is a thrilling profession, sometimes an adventurous profession, but it is one in which enjoyment increases a thousandfold with each step one advances in the knowledge of one's craft. It is time that the truth were told — there are no "mute, inglorious Miltons." Those who *can* write will succeed if they will follow the one necessary order — *write*. And those who cannot write — well, they are not Miltons anyway.

### ILLUSTRATIVE SUGGESTIONS

1. Although there are a number of sources where published lists of magazines and their editorial needs may be found the student's own survey will probably prove most valuable to him. If he has been reading stories diligently while studying this text, he will have gathered a fair idea of the needs of several magazines. Careful reading of others will increase his knowledge of the market.

2. It is an excellent plan to put this knowledge to

work by making one's own list of possible markets for the sort of story which seems to represent the writer's characteristic vein, keeping a card index of the magazines and their addresses. This affords a ready reference, and if the writer notes down the editorial needs of each magazine as he sees them it may serve now and then to suggest markets which he has forgotten.

3. It is an excellent idea to keep a card index of one's own stories to serve as a record of their wanderings. Some writers cross file under both the magazine and the story title. The cross file is perhaps most valuable in keeping a record of a particular magazine's interest in one's work. The author advises a single card system whereby the author keeps track of his stories by title. Note down the date each is sent out, the magazine, and the date returned or accepted. Note also whether the script was returned with a simple rejection slip or whether a letter accompanied it, since this is often, though not always, an indication of a particular magazine's interest or lack of it.



# STORIES FOR ANALYSIS



## THE BEST BAIT FOR MOSQUITOES<sup>1</sup>

By HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

THIS is a quiet story, with no great amount of action and with but two characters, Jaffray Brown, the chief actor, and one minor actor, whose identity is not revealed until the end of the story. Its main conflict is that of a man with himself. Briefly, Jaffray Brown, very much of an idealist and very much of a fisherman, having just lived through the ardors of a political crusade in which his frank idealism and attempt to play fair with his adversaries have met with defeat, has been sent by his doctor to the doubtful rest of a fishing expedition. For Jaffray goes after his fish as he goes after his politicians — by rule. In politics, it would seem to him little more than a crime to offer his adversaries anything like bait for their votes; in fishing he is equally scrupulous in adhering to his principles: trout must be caught with flies or not at all.

But the fish refuse to bite. They are as uninterested in his flies as were the politicians in his highly attractive scheme for ridding a certain piece of land of mosquitoes. And that sets up a conflict. For Jaffray would like to catch trout. But he realizes that the trout will not take his flies. Shall he compromise with his principles — use bait?

Dr. Canby, besides being author of the outstanding history of the short story, has written two other books upon this literary form. He is editor of the "Saturday Review of Literature," and a lecturer at Yale with professorial rank.

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## THE STORY

### THE BEGINNING

Jaffray Brown was fishing the Dead Diamond, with results so far a little discouraging. It was a fascinating stream to fish. A flat, wild valley between two dark ranges was its bed, over which the amber water meandered lazily, now looping from slope to slope, now returning on its course in U's and S's upon the floor of the forest. At each sharp turn a little spit of white sand ran out from the alders, and beyond each spit, at the elbow of the curve, was a dark, still pool, in the shadows of which trout lurked, and flashed now and then at a white miller on the surface.

But only the little fellows rose to Jaffray's flies, and they took hold with such a doubtful grip that only three or four times the line had tightened at the strike, and a fish come swinging and plunging into the net. In between the sand-spits it was alder-swamp and cedar-tangle. Hot, sweaty, his face atickle with the brush of leaves, and smarting with their sting, he was pushing through irritably, jerking his rod, when the line caught, and kicking at the tussocks that wound about his feet, "Let go, you dirty parasite, you!" he hissed at a brier that snarled around his arm; and "Confound you," he snapped at a larch that prodded his chin.

## THE DISCUSSION

The setting. The introductory sentence gives the keynote of the story, but the chief actor has not actually been introduced as yet. The details of setting are important, because the setting plays a part in shaping the chief actor's course.

Introduction of the chief actor. Jaffray Brown puts in his appearance, pushing his way through the tangle beside the stream. The problem is also introduced, though the reader is not entirely aware of it as yet. What is impressed upon him here is the setting detail which contributes to the chief actor's dissatisfaction with his situation. And the author is beginning to set Jaffray's character.

When he burst from the woods and slid panting on a sloping rock above the water, his nerves were all aquiver.

"I've got to calm down," he thought. "The doctor said 'no excitement,' and here I am as stirred up as if it were election day."

Plucking a few wisps of leaves from his reel, he examined his leader. The second fly had snapped off in the last encounter with the brush. He put on another ruefully.

"The trouble with me," he soliloquized, "is that I don't get the right wrist motion. Jim took twenty from this stretch yesterday. I guess what they say about my politics applies to my fishing. I don't know the game." His mind ran back to the fight for city betterment. "I might have known old Calkins would balk when it came to draining *his* marshes. What does he care if his workmen get the malaria! He thinks malaria is a gift of God."

A white moth eddied past his head, settled upon the noiseless current, was swirled into rough water below, and disappeared in a little curl of foam. "Any old bug catches them," he murmured. "Except my flies." Stepping carefully behind the alders on the sand-spit, he peered through their branches down upon a pool full of black spruce shadows, and overhung by a steep and mossy bank. A frog sprang from the rushes beneath him, plumped



With chief actor and problem introduced, the basic situation is now sketched in. Jaffray is off on a rest cure. But he takes his fishing too seriously, just as he took his political encounter. Notice how, through details of Jaffray's movements in examining his reel and his leader, a constantly moving picture of the chief actor is placed before the reader.

Details of the exposition are inserted. A suggestion of the political fight at home.

The problem is impressed more definitely through these paragraphs and through the analogy with the political fight at home until the reader realizes both that Jaffray is being thwarted in his desire to catch fish, and that the basic characteristic of being true to his principles is keeping him from solving his problem. Thus the first suspense is created: the question whether Jaffray will be able to solve the problem, complicated as the solution appears by the

into the pool, and swam manfully across its shadowed surface. A flash from the bottom, a rising shape, a broad and curving shoulder, and with an echoing splash he disappeared.

"A monster," Jaffray whispered tremulously, and cast his flies across the dimpling surface. A flash, a tug! He struck at empty water. Again he cast, and let the hooks sink till the ripples died away. As he drew in the line, a shape followed it slowly, then whisked back into darkness.

"That ends it," said Jaffray, mournfully. "He's too keen for me. A big, obvious bullfrog he swallows without looking; but when I play fair, and use a fly so as to give him a chance, I don't get even the opportunity of losing him. I wish I had some dynamite." He sat down beneath the alders and mopped his brows. "Now if I'd only let the ditching go to the city-hall crowd, they'd have taken *that* bait. But principles, civic honesty, public good! They looked at them and went back home, like that trout."

#### END OF THE BEGINNING

#### THE BODY

Something was moving through the cedars of the farther bank. He heard soft footfalls and the creak of bending boughs. "A deer," he thought, and stepped behind the alder screen.

basic characteristic and by the fact that the fish refuse to take flies.

The beginning ends with the reader in possession of the basic situation, the problem, and sufficient exposition to understand the situation. Also, the fate of the frogs has demonstrated a way out of the chief actor's difficulty — if his basic characteristic will allow him to take it. But Jaffray shows no inclination to feel that the "way out" is one which he would take.

This incident introduces the one minor actor of the cast, whose identity is still to be revealed. Notice that it is not necessary to the reader's understanding of the story to reveal his name,



A cedar at the pool end waved violently, and through the thick brush around it a gaitered foot came wriggling blindly, felt firm earth, and was followed by a khaki leg, a hunting-jacket, and a red and sweaty face. As the foot descended, another frog leaped from its impact, cut through the pool, and was swallowed in an even mightier splash. Face, body, and foot withdrew quickly into the herbage.

After an instant a hairy hand came pawing slowly through the leaves, hovered a moment, then descended with a sweep. In its fingers, as it rose, a frog sprawled limply. There was a tense pause; then out from above the cedars a light line swung the frog in a curve which ended over the black depths of the pool. A moment's skittering on the surface, a swirl, a whip of the tautened line, then the bushes burst, and the fisherman with bent rod and whining reel sprang knee-deep into the open water.

"You've got him," Jaffray yelled, and ran down on his sand-spit.

"I've got him," the other said calmly, playing his fish up and down through the wavering shadows. Twice it made for the rapids below, and was snubbed; once it fought its way to the stumps and root arms of the overhanging banks; then it sulked till Jaffray dislodged it with a stone; and at last, rolling and feebly darting, came home to the net. "He's safe," cried the fisherman.

because the reader is seeing the action through Jaffray's eyes, and Jaffray does not know who this other fisherman is. He is just some one else fishing the stream — to Jaffray. And the reader's relation to him is the same. He meets this minor actor casually with Jaffray. Watches the catching of the trout through Jaffray's eyes.

The incident also serves to impress more definitely upon the reader and upon Jaffray the ameliorating circumstance which may offer a way out for the chief actor. The other fisherman has shown that frogs will catch trout. Jaffray has only to use one and his problem is solved. But Jaffray's basic characteristic interferes. Notice that this entire scene is based upon his basic characteristic, just as all of them will be.

Examine the narrative tags which accompany the dialogue here and see how they serve to give it life and definition. This point is particularly shown in Jaffray's "You've got him," and the minor actor's "I've got him." Note what a different picture would have been given had the author written: "You've got him," commented Jaffray, laconically. "I've got him," shouted the fisherman triumphantly.

Jaffray stepped upon a tussock to get a better view.

"Yes, he's a beauty," he said a little coldly. "But ——"

The fisherman smiled as he dropped the fish into his basket. "But you wish you'd done the catching. Say, weren't you here first? I thought I heard somebody."

Jaffray blushed.

"I got him to rise, but I couldn't hook him," he murmured. "I'm using flies," he added politely.

The politeness was wasted.

"So would I, so would I," said the stranger, "if they'd bite 'em. But that fellow wanted a frog, and I gave him one. Say, rub your hands around under that tussock and I'll bet you'll find a big fellow. Put your hook through his lips and let him sink about a foot. You're sure to get a fish from that bit up ahead there. They aren't taking flies to-day."

Jaffray hesitated.

"I — I don't use bait for trout," he said with some embarrassment. "I like to get them on flies or not at all."

The hairy man on the other bank leaned his rod against a cedar and sat down on a flat rock.

"Say, that's interesting," he said. "What's your idea? I've heard of fellows that feel that way about fishing, but I never ran into one be-



The second conflict of the story begins with this scene, and it is a corollary of the first, growing naturally out of it. The first conflict which runs through the entire story is the conflict of the chief actor with himself. But here there is a conflict of the chief actor with the minor actor, each attempting to prove that his point of view toward fishing is the correct one. And observe that the conflict between the two men is built squarely upon contrast. The stranger is a different sort of person from Jaffray. He is quite practical about his fishing. He has come to catch fish, but Jaffray has come to play a game. There is a contrast between the sportsman, the idealist, and the practical person, the man who wants to win, whether he follows all the rules or not. Without this contrast, the conflict would be impossible.

fore. Have a cigar? I guess I can throw it across. What you got against bait?"

Jaffray was painfully aware of the mere handful of trout in his creel. He caught the cigar, lit it, and sought refuge in similes.

"Why, it's like golf or any other game," he answered, puffing. "A game's got to have its rules in order to be a game, hasn't it? In golf you don't pick your ball out of a hole, do you? You hit it out; that is, if you play fair. And you don't take any muddy little worm or bug—or frog that comes along, and *feed* your trout; you tempt him with something that isn't like his food, that he has to be cajoled into taking. That is," he ended somewhat pedantically, "you make rules for your game, and then you follow them."

The hairy man stretched out on his rock. "But look here, mister, it's trout you're after, ain't it? Well, suppose they don't want your flies; you lose your fish, don't you? Don't you, now?"

Jaffray grew heated.

"But I don't *want* my fish, if I can't catch him according to the rules of the game." He waved his cigar toward the water. "Why not dynamite your old pool, and be done with it? That's where *your* logic leads."

The man on the other side chuckled.

"I did once," he said reminiscently. "But I can't run fast enough now for that. Just the

Notice how a moving picture of these two men is kept before the reader by the use of narrative tags and bits of descriptive action mixed in with the dialogue. The author has inserted almost no actual bits of description, of portraiture. Still, you build up in your mind a distinct picture of the two men. The dialogue itself is likewise distinctive, contrasting. Even without the narrative tags it would be possible to tell from the choice of words which actor was speaking.

This is a story of little action and of a great deal of dialogue, for much of the story itself is revealed through dialogue.



same, if fish is what I was after, I wouldn't let any rules stop *me* from getting 'em. They're not *my* rules." He paused to let his words sink in. "I ain't been in politics for thirty years without learnin' that the way to get what you want is to get it."

"If it comes to that," Jaffray responded angrily, "you might as well say, if you're a politician, 'Votes are what I'm after, and I'll get them any way they can be got.'"

"Are you in politics?" the hairy man asked sharply.

Jaffray flushed.

"No — no, not in practical politics," he answered a little bitterly.

"Well, politics," his neighbor commented, "ain't so very different from fishing." He picked the big fish from the basket and ran his fingers over its smooth skin caressingly.

"Ain't he a beauty? But what I don't see is, why not give the fish what they *want*, instead of what you think is good for 'em?" He glanced quizzically across the shadowed water, and rolled his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other.

"It's overcoming difficulties that makes a game good sport," said Jaffray thoughtfully. "I have to choose my flies to suit varying conditions. I have to cast just right. I have to strike as the fish rises. It's better to catch a fish that way — when he's had a chance —

The dialogue through this scene demonstrates the proper and balanced use of conversation to reveal character and to advance action. Notice that it also carries a certain amount of exposition. The fight in Jaffray's home town is revolving back into the picture constantly as a simile for Jaffray. Later it comes in definitely to motivate the dénouement. The dialogue is perfectly natural. There are short speeches and longer ones, quite in the usual manner of argument. But there is nothing superfluous — and there are no "set" speeches — that is, oratorical flourishes. Each bit of dialogue reveals further the character of the speaker.

The conflict between the two men, although its starting point is a difference of opinion over fishing, is pointed by the injection of politics. They are peculiarly inter-related here, because the same arguments seem to go for both.

Observe that this secondary conflict between

than to lug him in with a piece of meat. It's better sport."

"My idea of sport is getting fish," said his opponent, doggedly.

Jaffray lost his temper.

"Nonsense!" he cried. "You could buy your fish for half what it costs you to come here. It's the game that you come for, and playing fair and keeping to rules is what makes the game. If you can't see the moral side, at least you can see there's more *fun* in my method. It's more fun to catch trout in a hard way than in an easy way, isn't it? And it's the fun that you are after. You're like" — he gesticulated for a comparison — "You're like a fellow in my home town who has been in on every piece of graft as long as I can remember. Licked me last month, but that's not why I'm mentioning him. He's got plenty of money. He's in politics just for the fun of the thing. But what he gets is not fun, but more money. Now, if he were a real sport, he'd fight on the other side."

The hairy man glanced at him keenly.

"Whad d'ye mean — 'other side'?" he asked.

"I don't see the fun in gettin' licked."

Jaffray forgot about fishing.

"I'll show you," he said, expansively. "A crowd of us started in last year to clean up the marshes in our town. We got statistics to prove that if we could get rid of mosquitoes, the city would save enough in increased value of



the two men is always based upon the major conflict of the story. For the stranger's arguments — if they impress themselves strongly enough upon the chief actor — will make him decide that, after all, what he wants is to catch a fish and, therefore, to try a frog. In other words, although the end of this conflict between the two men is for one of them to win the other to his way of thinking, actually it leads forward toward the solution of the major conflict — and problem.

The argument here runs directly into politics, abandoning fishing entirely. Notice its effect upon Jaffray — and also upon the main conflict of the story. The stranger, who has clashed so sharply with Jaffray's ideas of sportsmanship in fishing, also displays a different philosophy of politics. Yet it is a game with him, just as it is with Jaffray. It is the game which appeals to the stranger; it is likewise the game which appeals to Jaffray. But if the stranger can convince Jaffray that there is a different set of rules in the political game, just as valid as those Jaffray follows, it will undermine his belief in his fishing rules. Therefore, all of this dialogue leads directly to the solution of the problem. Suspense is heightened through this possible undermining of Jaffray's political philosophy. As a "technical" trout fisherman, it will take a great deal to break down Jaffray's stanch adherence to his rules.

real estate to pay the cost five times over. Well, things were coming our way. All we needed was a few more votes in the board of aldermen so as to be able to condemn a strip of marsh belonging to a tight-wad old manufacturer who wouldn't drain his lands. If we had won there, we would have gone after the railroad, which owns more marsh than all the rest put together, and got them, too — cleaned up the whole town, and increased the health rate ten per cent. Well, in steps Donergan. 'What do I get out of it?' he asks. 'A good town to live in,' the boys tell him. 'I said, what do *I* get out of it?' he answers and slaps his pockets.

"When I heard about it, I decided to ram the statistics into the aldermen's thick heads, and let Donergan go hang. Well, sir, before I got to the city hall, he had bought every man jack of the doubtful ones — contracts, law business, coal orders, that sort of thing, you know. The vote went dead against us, and that's the end of the mosquito campaign."

"Licked you, did he?" the fisherman commented. "Well, mebbe *that* was what he wanted." He chuckled.

"It certainly wasn't money he was after," Jaffray acknowledged. "But any way you look at it, he made a mistake."

"In fightin' you?"

"No," said Jaffray, "in spoiling the fight."

But he feels very deeply about politics, too. The stranger is attacking him at a vital point.

All of this is of the utmost importance in convincing the reader that there is a possibility of Jaffray's throwing overboard his rules. Credulity upon the reader's part in any point of the story is one of the most necessary considerations of the author. Building toward his climax, he is opening the door, in this case, for either outcome: that Jaffray will forget his rules and use bait to catch his fish, or that he will stick to his guns. Thus suspense is heightened.

As the body ends, the story is well on its way toward the climax which will be reached at the point when Jaffray really comes to his decision: that is, when he decides whether he will solve his problem of catching fish by the direct action method of using bait, or stick to his self-



If he had known real sport when he saw it, he would have come in with us."

The fisherman rose and picked up his rod. "Does your friend Donergan fish with bait?" he asked, yawning.

"No friend of mine," cried Jaffray, warmly. "I've never seen him, though I know him by reputation well enough. But I'll bet he does, and catches his meat in two minutes when he might have had an hour's fun trying to hook a trout. You're like him."

"I guess I am," the hairy man remarked, reflectively. "I guess I am, though I never thought of it that way before." He swung on his creel, and threw his cigar into the rapids. "But just the same, if the trout won't bite on flies, why even a 'real sport' has to use a frog, ain't he? Say, if you'd only tried bait on them aldermen — the job of suing the railroad for instance!" Before Jaffray could answer, "Well, so long," he called, and pushed into the forest cover.

#### END OF THE BODY

#### THE ENDING

Jaffray disentangled his rod from the alders, and moved on in the opposite direction. The stream visibly curved to the right below the next rapids.

"He's stirred up every pool for a quarter of a

administered rules of the game which would forbid such a course.

Since this is a story of little action, the entire second movement has been taken up by dialogue. But the story has moved ahead nonetheless surely. Jaffray has not only been seeking to convince his adversary that his philosophy is iron-clad, irrefutable. He has also been working to convince himself more surely. But the stranger's conversation has carried doubts into his mind. Whether they are strong enough to make him forget his philosophy is the question. Well, the stranger has left, Jaffray must rise and continue his fishing. Now, then, will come the test of his principles. The stranger's arguments have served as minor tests of his own ideas. And he has withstood them. Will he continue to? That is the reader's question as the ending begins.

mile with his confounded bait. I'll cut across the bend," he thought. "I wonder who the old chap is. Looks like a corporation president, talks like a policeman. Gad! I wish I'd gotten that trout!"

Leaving the stream-side, he stepped back into the tangled jungle. Myriads of gnats rose from the soggy ground and tortured him. It was hot with the clinging heat of forest undergrowths. Raspberry-vines caught his ankles; birch-shoots whipped his face; and when he tried to drive head first through the network of branches, clammy spider-webs wreathed his forehead, and bark fragments worked down the back of his neck. After ten minutes' going, he sank upon a fallen tree, exhausted. But he set his jaw, and plunged again into the tangle. In the gloom ahead the river was gurgling. He made for it. The cedars gave place to balsam and firmer footing. He tiptoed over the needles, and, pulling aside a branch, saw a long, brown pool, foam flecked, lying in the dappled shadow. Half-way down beside a rock over which the amber current slid without rippling were three brown shapes.

A melancholy foreboding warned him that in the drowsy repose of mid-morning they would not take a fly. Nevertheless, he crawled noiselessly upstream above them, and drifted his line down the current. Three times his flies came upstream through the broken water. Never a



As Jaffray plunges across through the jungle, the setting of the story, detailed somewhat in the early paragraphs of the beginning, resumes its importance as a contributing factor to the hastening of the climax. Irritating him, it increases his determination to fight through his problem. Still he is determined to find a solution without breaking his rules. But these final tests are stiffer.

Discouragement is near at hand. The chief actor begins to realize finally that solution is impossible unless he utilizes the one course which he feels sure will bring success. But his basic characteristic still restrains him.

rise. He put down his rod and crawled back through the balsams. The wise old trout lay there waiting, watching the flow of the current. Only a fin flicker now and then showed life. A white miller fluttered upon the current above them. They did not stir. A sodden pine-cone came bumping along the bottom. In a flash they were upon it; then swung back, disgusted. "They want bait," said Jaffray, sadly — "bait, meat!"

As he crawled back through the balsams he heard the sound of faintly rippling water not far away on his left. A stream must enter the river there. He saw in imagination a grassy estuary, and frogs, fat, green frogs, sitting ready to hand in the shallow water. Temptation smote him. How ridiculous to go hungry for a convention, a mere scruple! And yet a curious reluctance held him back from the stream and its frogs. "I *hate* a compromise!" he said nervously. "I said I'd never use bait, and I won't, unless I'm starving."

He found his rod and cast again. The flies came back as unmolested as the spruce-needles that floated beside them. His hunger increased. "Obstinacy," he murmured, "sheer obstinacy. I lost those aldermen; and here I am again, losing my trout. All those fellows wanted was the right kind of bait. Donergan gave it to them; I didn't. I might have got them if I'd offered a chance to fight the railroad. I might

The basic characteristic in action. The chief actor begins to realize the possibility that he *might* solve his problem. But the basic characteristic restrains him.

This is the last preclimactic test. The chief actor is almost at the point where he must solve his problem by direct action or go home with a comparatively empty creel. The fact that he wants the trout for luncheon increases the importance of the test. All of these points are of significance. For the short story is a continual test of the basic characteristic in action, a continual test of the author's original



have gotten Donergan. Why couldn't I see that!" The river, the hidden trout, the frogs waiting in their pool, became symbolic of his struggle with politics. "Was I honest or was I obstinate?" With sudden clairvoyance he saw that there was a question there. His brow wrinkled in thought. A chickadee scolded him from a spruce-branch unheard.

"The certain thing," he said aloud and bitterly, "is that I lost — lost the fight, lost my chance to help the town. That seems to prove that the no-bait theory won't work, doesn't it? Let's be practical for once," he murmured. "Confound it! I'm going to get a frog!"

The noise of running water grew louder as he worked his way through the thicket. If a tributary, the stream was a large one. Perhaps there would be no frogs. He laughed at this possible ending of his moral crisis. Or perhaps, if there were frogs, the trout would not touch them. Suddenly he found himself at the edge of a murmurous pool as wide and deep as the one he had left behind him. Below he could see the pellucid curl of rapids. It was not a stream; it was a river. And the water was running the wrong way! The truth flashed upon him. He was at the neck of a horseshoe curve. This was his own river. And indeed, as he grasped his location, he saw and recognized a jagged quartz rock from which earlier that morning he had hooked a trout.

proposition — that a certain actor, placed in a certain situation, will act thus and so. The tests assist in impressing this fact upon the reader to the point where he is ready to believe in the actor's decision at the climax.

The climax itself. Notice that it is motivated entirely by the basic characteristic. There would have been two possibilities. Either the actor may persevere and finally catch his trout by the rules; or he may go against his rules and catch one with bait. But this is the climax of the story: the point at which the chief actor decides to solve his problem by direct action.

Immediately following the climax — which is always the point of decision in the chief actor's mind — he sets forth to solve his problem in accordance with his decision. Thus, Jaffray now begins his search for a frog.

But a movement nearer caught his eye. It was a fine, fat frog stirring in the reeds. Kneeling, he crept softly to the water's edge and raised one grasping hand. But before it fell, something swished above his head, and a sudden wave of the bushes across the stream caught his eye.

A felt hat emerged from the alders, a hairy hand, a humid forehead. Jaffray, crouching rigid and helpless, stared at the apparition with horrid fascination. He tried to rise with dignity, but sank on one hand deeper into the mud.

"I thought I'd try — some bait." He paused, stammering.

"Why, hello," said the hairy man. He also seemed embarrassed. "After a frog, are you? Well, it's the way to catch 'em." He coughed and hesitated, then with a vicious twist jerked his line free from an overhanging balsam. A Parmacheenee Belle looped with two flies of darker hue dropped upon the dimpling water. "I'm tryin' flies." He laughed shamefacedly. "I — I ain't catchin' many, but, say, the fun *is* in tryin' to get 'em. Only, golwash it! I ain't got but one!"

His confession seemed to ease him.

"Say," he cried affably, "come across on the rocks up there and have some lunch with me. My name's Donergan; yes, *Donergan!* I want to talk about the best bait for mosquitoes. Get me? Well, come along. Mebbe you and I against the railroad can start somethin' yet."

This is the *dénouement* of the story which reveals the results of the chief actor's decision to solve his problem. In this case, the chief actor never actually solves the problem in catching a trout with bait, but the reader is firmly convinced that, had Donergan not suddenly appeared, he would have done so.

The *dénouement* must unravel all the threads of the story, and in this case, all that was required, besides showing how Jaffray carried out his decision, was to reveal the identity of the other fisherman. He could not have been brought into the story merely to serve as a foil for Jaffray's conversation; the reader was entitled to know who he was. And the *dénouement* answers his question.

Everything has now been rounded out — explained. The story had a definite beginning, a problem which could be solved — and was — and an ending. Clearly there is no need for the reader to accompany Jaffray and Donergan to the rocks for their conversation about the "best bait for mosquitoes." For the story, begun in the story's beginning, has ended. Whatever may follow would be — another story.



## ILLUSTRATIVE SUGGESTIONS

1. In considering this story, a particularly valuable exercise is to be found in noting down the story *materials* which are suggested but not actually included in the action as scenes. Why would it have been less effective to begin the story in Jaffray's home town, showing the end of the political fight; his return home dejected; his decision to leave on a fishing trip?

2. This story contains few scenes and little action. Can you suggest other scenes, more action, which might have been included?

3. Examine the sentences which are pure exposition and note how this material is woven into the story piecemeal. Does it at any point halt the forward movement of the action?

4. Have you a clear picture of the chief actor? Of the minor actor? Look for the sentences which contain actual bits of portraiture of the two actors. They are, you will find, extremely meagre. Is there, nonetheless, a clear picture of the two men throughout the story?

5. There is one phrase in the story, used in connection with Donergan, which conforms to the *descriptive tag* discussed in the text. It is "the hairy man." Note how this aids in forming your picture of Donergan.

6. See if you can determine other tests of the basic characteristic which might have been used to move the story toward its climax.

7. Note particularly the use of the basic characteristic throughout this story. Observe that the action depends upon it at every point — that if Jaffray were not the kind of man the author has told you he is — possessed of just that basic characteristic — there would have been no story at all.

## THE SHAME DANCE<sup>1</sup>

By WILBUR DANIEL STEELE

“STORIES of New York life preferable.”

Well, then, here is a story of New York. A tale of the night-heart of the city, where the vein of Forty-second touches the artery of Broadway; where, amid the constellations of chewing-gum ads and tooth-pastes and memory methods, rise the incandescent façades of “dancing academies” with their “sixty instructresses,” their beat of brass and strings, their whisper of feet, their clink of dimes. . . . Let a man not work away his strength and his youth. Let him breathe a new melody; let him draw out of imagination a novel step, a more fantastic tilt of the pelvis, a wilder gesticulation of the deltoid. Let him put his hand to the Touch of Gold. . . .

It is a tale of this New York. That it didn't chance to happen in New York is beside the point. Where? It wouldn't help you much if I told you. Taai. That island. Take an imaginary ramrod into Times Square, push it straight down through the center of the earth; where it comes out on the other side will not be

<sup>1</sup> From *The Shame Dance*, by Wilbur Daniel Steele. Published by Harper & Bros. Reprinted by permission of the author.

## THE DISCUSSION

Wilbur Daniel Steele is one of the preëminent American short-story writers. "The Shame Dance," besides being one of his best stories, is of special interest to the inexperienced writer for a number of reasons. First, perhaps, because it is a particularly skilful handling of a complicated plot; second, because it shows to excellent advantage the technique of the second type of first-person narration described in Chapter IX; third, because it contains an example of the conflict of man with Fate; fourth, because its title, whose full meaning is only apparent when the story is practically finished, shows the effective use of this important medium to heighten the reader's interest and satisfaction.

The introduction of the story affords an immediate example of contrast. Here is a story of New York, a typical sector of New York. But — this story of a New York which could not be mistaken for any other city in the world actually takes place on the other side of the world. Here, then, is an example of that sort of introduction calculated to arouse interest in the reader which was mentioned in Chapter I.



very many thousand miles wide of that earth-speck in the South Seas. Some thousands, yes; but out here a few thousand miles and a month or so by schooner make less difference than they do where the trains run under the ground. . . .

“Glauber’s Academy” — “Einstein’s Restaurant” — “Herald Square” —

I can’t tell you how bizarrely those half-fabulous names fell from Signet’s lips in the turquoise and gold of the afternoon. It was like the babble of some monstrous and harmless mythology. And all the while, as he kicked his bare heels on the deck house and harassed me with his somnolent greed for “talk,” one could see him wondering, wondering in the back of his mind. So he would have been wondering through all the hours of weeks, months — it had come to the dignity of years, on the beach, in the bush — wondering more than ever under the red iron roof of the Dutchman: “What in hell am I doing here? What in hell?”

A guttersnipe, pure and simple. That’s to say *impure* and unpleasantly complex. It was extraordinary how it stuck. Even with nothing on but a pair of cotton pants, swimming out to me among the flashing bodies of the islanders, men, women, girls, youths, who clung to the anchor cable and showed their white teeth for pilot biscuit, condensed milk, and gin — especially gin — even there you could see Signet, in imagination, dodging through the traffic on

True, it has a slightly different emphasis at first. There, it was pointed out that the story generally concerns familiar men and women. Only at the time the story picks them up there is something particularly unusual in their lives which makes their story worth the telling. In this introduction it is the background first which is contrasted. Here is a section of New York which might not be particularly interesting to a random glance. But move that section to the South Seas in the person of the leading actor; immediately it attracts new glamour, an interest beyond itself.

Seventh Avenue to pick the *Telegraph Racing Chart* out of the rubbish can under the Elevated.

I hadn't an idea who the fellow was. He burst upon me unheralded. I sail out of west-coast ports, but once I had been in New York. That was enough for him. He was "pals" in ten minutes; in fifteen, from his eminence on the deck house, with a biscuit in one hand and a tumbler of much-diluted Hollands in the other, he gazed down at his erstwhile beach fellows with almost the disdainful wonder of a tourist from a white ship's rail. . . .

"Gi' me an article you can retail at a nickel — any little thing everybody needs — or gi' me a song with a catchy chorus — something you can turn out on them ten-cent records. . . . That makes *me*. Don't want any Wall Street stuff. That's for Rockefeller and the boobs. But just one time le' me catch on with one little old hunch that'll go in vaudeville or the pi'tures — get Smith and Jones diggin' for the old nickel. . . . That makes *me*. Then the line can move up one. That's the thing about New York. . . . Say, man, len' me a cigarette. . . . But that's the thing about Broadway. When you make, you make *big*. I know a guy turned out a powder-puff looked like a lor'nette — a quarter of a dollar. You know how the Janes'll fall for a thing like that ——"

It was completely preposterous, almost un-

And then there is Signet, the typical hanger-on in this New York atmosphere. Signet, back in New York, might be drab enough. But Signet transplanted in the island of Taai — that is something else. Here, then, is that immediate contrast, that compelling and unusual aspect of things ordinarily familiar, which strikes the reader's fancy.



comfortable. It made a man look around him. On the schooner's port side spread the empty blue of the South Pacific; the tenuous snowdrift of the reef, far out, and the horizon. On the starboard hand, beyond the little space of the anchorage, curved the beach, a pink-white scimitar laid flat. Then the scattering of thatched and stilted huts, the red, corrugated-iron store, residence and godowns of the Dutch trader, the endless Indian file of coco palms, the abrupt green wall of the mountain. . . . A twelve-year-old girl, naked as Eve and, I've no doubt, thrice as handsome, stood watching us from the mid-decks in a perfection of immobility, an empty milk tin propped between her brown palms resting on her breast. Twenty fathoms off a shark-fin, blue as lapis in the shadow, cut the water soundlessly. The hush of ten thousand miles was disturbed by nothing but that grotesque, microscopic babbling:

"Say you play in bad luck. Well, you can't play in bad luck *f'rever*. Not if you're wise. One time I got five good wheezes. Good ones! Sure fire! One of 'em was the old one about the mother-'n-law and the doctor, only it had a perfectly novel turn to it. Did I make? I did not. Why? Well, a good friend o' mine lifts them five wheezes, writes a vaudeville turn around 'em, and makes big. Big!

"What does that learn me? Learns me to go

As an example of the second type of first-person narration the story is told by a *chief actor* who plays the rôle of an observer. Dole, the trader, is the raconteur. Notice that no setting is established for the narration of the story. You may be sitting with Dole before your own fire in Kansas; you may be with him in San Francisco, in Papeete, on the deck of his trading schooner. It really doesn't matter. And by failing to establish a setting unessential to the action of the story, no scene is introduced which turns your interest from the story itself. As is proper to this type of first-person narration, Dole, who tells you the story, is not its protagonist. That rôle is reserved for the guttersnipe, Signet, who therefore becomes the *leading actor*, in the terminology of this manual. It is Signet's story in which the reader is interested; Signet's obsessive desire to get himself back to Broadway, Signet's conflicts, Signet's actions. But the story is not seen through his eyes. Rather, it is through Dole that one visualizes the action. The trader moves through the short story as an observer; he tells the reader about it; and though he is technically the *chief actor* of the story, actually he takes no part in shaping its episodes, in helping Signet or hindering him in his desire to plant his nervous feet once more on Broadway.

bear on friendship. So next time I get an idea ——”

The girl had put the milk tin down between her toes on deck and turned her head.

“Digger!” I called to the mate. “Clear the vessel! Shove them all overboard! Here comes the Dutchman!”

Before the advance of the trader’s canoe, painted vermilion like his establishment and flying over the water under the paddle strokes of his six men, Signet took himself hastily overboard with the rest. There was no question of protest or false pride. Over he went. Rising and treading water under the taffrail, and seeing the trader still some fathoms off, he shook the wet from the rag of a beard with which long want of a razor had blurred his peaked chin and gathered up the ends of the conversation:

“No, Dole, you can’t play in bad luck *f’rever*. One sure-fire hunch, that’s all. That makes me. When I get back to Broadway ——”

A paddle blade narrowly missed his head. He dived.

The Dutchman told me more about him that evening. I dined at the trader’s house. He was a big-bodied, tow-haired man who spoke English with the accent of an east-coast Scot, drank like a Swede, and viewed life through the eyes of a Spaniard — that is, he could be diabolical without getting red in the face.

"No, my dear sir, that Signet shall not 'get back to Broadway.' Too many have I seen. He is too tired. Quite too tired."

"But how in the world did he ever come here, Mynheer?"

"That is simple. This Signet got drunk in Papeete. He was on his way to Australia with a pugilist. How should he be in a pugilist's company, this crab? Because he plays a good game of pinochle — to keep the pugilist's mind bright. At any event, the steamship stops at Tahiti. This Signet gets drunk. 'Soused!' And the steamship is gone without him. No more pinochle for the pugilist, what? . . . From then, my dear sir, it is what it shall always be; one island throws him to another island. Here he shall stay for a while ——"

"Till you decide to 'throw' him to another island, eh, Mynheer?"

"No, but I am alone. Sometimes to amuse myself I will invite him to dine with me. I put on him a suit of the evening clothes which belong to my nephew who is dead. But I will not allow him the razor, since his absurd beard is amusing to me. Afterward, however, I take away the evening clothes and I will kick him out. But he is talking continuously."

"I believe you, Mynheer."

"But at last I will say: 'My dear sir, suppose that you should have the most brilliant idea; that "hunch" of yours. "Sure-fire." What



advantage will it do you here in the island of Taai? You are not here on Broadway. You are too many thousand miles. You cannot come there. You are too tired. It takes money. Now, my dear sir, I am putting a trench about the godowns. If you wish, I will let you work for me.'"

"What does he say to that, Mynheer?"

"He says, 'Do you take me for an Italian?'"

"Then I will say: 'No; you see you are too tired. Also you are too soft. You are a criminal. That's natural to you. But you think of police. You have a wish, say. Well, my dear sir, but would you kill a man — three — ten men — to have that wish? No, you are too tired, and you must have the police. But here there are no police. *I* am the police. Why do you not kill *me*? Ha-ha-ha! Then you could take my property. Then you would "make big," as you say. My dear sir, that is a "hunch"! That is "sure fire"! Ha-ha-ha!' ... Then I will kick him out in his coolie cotton pants."

After coffee the trader said: "One gallon of the Hollands which you sent me ashore has disappeared. The kitchen boys are 'careless.' Also I wink one eye when a schooner arrives. Of course they will dance to-night, however. You would care to go up, my dear sir?"

Of course we went. There's no other amusement in an islet like Taai but the interminable

Although the author leaves to the student an analysis of "The Shame Dance," certain suggestions may call his attention to points which should not be overlooked. First, what is the main conflict which runs through the story? Primarily, it may be presumed, it is that of man with his background, the second general type mentioned in Chapter VI. The problem of the story, of course, is Signet's wish to reach Broadway again — with the "sure-fire hunch" which will bring him fortune. Between wish and fulfillment, however, stand two great obstacles. First, the few thousands of miles which separate him from the familiar neighborhood of "Glauber's Academy." Second, himself, his own deficiencies. And so, complementing the conflict of a man with his background is the first conflict mentioned in Chapter VI — that of a man with himself. It is left for the Dutch trader to bring out that fact in this scene. Should you say that this much-discussed deficiency in Signet which the conflict implies is the guttersnipe's basic characteristic?

Notice that in this scene the Dutchman introduces the major part of the exposition.

native dance. The Dutchman led the way up a narrow, bushy ravine, guiding me by sound rather than by sight.

“Up this same very path,” I heard him, “has gone one uncle of mine. They pulled him to the advance with one rope around his arms. Then they cut him up and ate him. But that was many years ago, my dear sir. Now I am the law. Maybe there shall come, now and then, a Dutch gunboat to have a look-in. I raise up that flag. The captain shall dine with me. All is good. But, my dear sir, I am the law.”

The “music” began to be heard, a measured monotone of drums, a breath of voices in a recitative chant, slightly impassioned by that vanished gallon. The same old thing, indeed; one of the more than fifty-seven varieties of the island *hula*. Then that had died away.

The light from the “place” grew among the higher leaves. And the trader, becoming visible, halted. I saw him standing, listening.

“No, my dear sir, but that is a new thing.”

He started forward. He stopped again. I heard it now. Out of the familiar, hollow tautophony of drumbeats there began to emerge a thread of actual melody — an untraditional rise and fall of notes — a tentative attack, as it were, on the chromatic scale of the west. No he-goat’s skin stretched on bamboo would do that.

It is interesting to observe throughout this episode of the native dance some of the advantages of first-person over third-person narration. Notice those sentences and phrases which would have been necessarily eliminated had this been third-person narration. Try to visualize the handling of this scene in third-person narration and decide whether the result would have been more or less effective.

Notice the sentences of description slipped in here and there, heightening the effect of the background. As this scene draws to a close, notice how the author leaves the spotlight focused upon Signet, suggesting, obviously, that the leading actor has been caught by his great idea. Here is suspense. What will Signet do about it?



We pushed on, curious. We came out into the "place." The scene under the candlenut torches was as familiar to us as the Ohio River of Uncle Tom to the small-town schoolboy; the meager rows of three-quarters naked Kanakas, yellow with saffron and blue with tattooer's ink; the old women in the background of sultry lights and enormous shadows compounding endless balls of *popoi* for the feast; the local and desceptered chieftain squatting on his hams and guarding the vanished gallon between his knees; this was all as it should have been. This was the convention. . . . But what was really happening on that sylvan, torchlit stage that night was something as new as anything can be under the sun, because it was something that had not happened for ten thousand years.

We who are worn with novelty can never reconquer for ourselves the thrill of an unmitigated wonder. We have sold the birthright. But imagine the toppling of a hundred centuries! You could have seen it in the eyes of those watchers, in their rapt, rapacious attention, in the conflict that went on within them visibly; traitorous applause pent and pitted against all the instinctive protest of an established art. . . .

"Yes, but this isn't *dancing!*"

Yet their bodies, one here, one there, would begin to sway. . . .

Three Kanaka men, strangers to the island,

sat cross-legged on the turf. One had taken over a drum from a local musician. The other two had instruments fashioned of dried gourds with fingering pieces of bamboo and strings of gut — barbaric cousins to the mandolin. So, on this one night in history, the music of another tribe had come to Taai. It just escaped being an authentic “tune.” How it escaped was indefinable. The sophisticated ear would almost have it, and abruptly it had got away in some provoking lapse, some sudden and bizarre disintegration of tone. And the drumbeat, bringing it back, ran like a fever pulse in a man’s blood.

In the center of the sward, her back to the musicians, a solitary female danced; a Kanaka woman, clothed in a single shift of the sheerest crimson cotton, tied at one shoulder and falling to mid-thigh. Not from Taai did this woman come; one saw that; nor from any near island or group. Her beauty was extraordinary, like that of the Marquesans, with that peculiar straightness of all lines, at once Grecian, austere, and incalculably voluptuous. . . .

The dance, as I saw it for the first time that night, I will not speak of. I have traded to many islands in many groups — even the Low Archipelago — but the island where that dance was indigenous I am sure I’ve never touched. Compared with any of the *hulas*, set and fixed in each locality as the rites of Rome, it was so-

phisticated; it gave an illusion of continuous invention and spontaneity; it was flesh swept by a wind and shattered; it ravished the eyes.

I don't know how long I watched; how long all the immortal flame in me lent itself to the histrionic purposes of that woman. But I shall never forget it. Never! Never!

I looked away. I saw two faces. One of them hung over my shoulder. It was the trader's. It was the face of a man who has lived a very long while wielding power of life and death over unsatisfying satisfactions. A man awakened! The toppling of a hundred centuries, indeed!

The other was Signet's. Scarred by leaf shadows, thrust like a swimmer's from the meager sea of heads and naked shoulders, it held as still as a death-mask minute by minute, except that, in the penumbra cast by the veil of goat tuft on his chin, the Adam's apple was convulsed at intervals, as if he were swallowing, as if the man were *drinking!*

The night grew. The torches were consumed, the "place" deserted. Somewhere the amazing voyagers had taken themselves to rest. A half-moon mutilated the island — long stripes of palms, shadow-scars of defiles, mottles of bushes. It was like a sleeping animal, a tiger of deep blue and blue-white, an enormous leopard.

We sat on the veranda at the Residence, the

This episode on the Dutchman's veranda is the key scene in the story of Signet and his problem of getting back to Broadway with his "sure-fire hunch." The Dutchman, with the most elaborate of gestures, has opened the way for definite action to solve at least part of his problem. Thus early comes the real climax of Signet's story. Observe how this denies the older definition of a short story's action as



trader and I. By and by, soft-footed, Signet was there, occupying the lowermost step.

The Dutchman talked. Like the able administrator he was, he had already all the data to be procured. Into his ears had poured the whispered trickles of a score of informants.

"You are right, my dear sir. Marquesan. You have been there?"

"No."

"She is called in Polynesian, 'Queen Daughter.' My people, who know nothing as a rule, of course — but they tell me the woman is in actuality the daughter of a queen. But what is a Kanaka queen? After all, Signet, my dear sir, down there, what is one queen, out here?"

The trader was obviously in a good humor. He had not been excited for years. The man was alive. I've said he was like a Spaniard in that he could be diabolical without getting red in the face. Diabolically devious and strategic! Before he resumed he blew three mouthfuls of cigar smoke out into the moonlight, where they burst from the shadow under the roof like mute cannon shots, round and silvery. Beneath them, from the step, Signet's eyes were fixed upon the trader's face, dry, rapt, glazed with some imperious preoccupation.

"But they tell me this woman has danced in a great many islands. She will go from here to another island to dance. The three men are her husbands. But she is no wife. A maid,

mounting steadily upward toward the climax, removed by only a paragraph or two from the story's ending, after which the tempo lags. For here, in spite of his basic characteristic, the leading actor slips through the bougainvillea foliage for a gun to solve his problem. And yet the story is not half finished. Naturally the reader's interest is heightened rather than lowered. The leading actor has taken his steps to solve the problem by direct action. "Now," the reader is ready to say, "let's see what comes of all this."

that woman! They have the hardihood to tell me that. Ha-ha-ha! But, then, she is daughter to a queen. With those 'husbands' she crosses a hundred leagues of sea in her sailing canoe. That royal canoe! To dance at another island. . . ."

As the Dutchman talked, blowing his smoke bursts into the moonlight, the vision of that Marquesan woman came again before me. I perceived her, under the heavy procession of his words, a figure of astounding romance, an adventuress incomparable, a Polynesian bacchante. No, I saw her as the missionary of a strange thing, crossing oceans, daring thirst and gale and teeth of sharks, hurrying deeper and deeper into the outseas of mystery that small, devoted polyandrous company of husbands, at once her paddlers, cooks, flunkies, watchdogs, music makers. "Queen Daughter!"

Royal and self-anointed priestess of that unheard-of dance, the tribal dance, no doubt, of some tiny principality rearing a cone in the empty hugeness of the sea. . . . I couldn't get away from my time and race. I found myself wondering "what she got out of it" — in some jungle-bowered, torch-lit "high place," to feel again the toppling of ten thousand years? Was it something to feel the voluptuous and abominable beauty of that rhythm going out of her flesh, beat by beat, and entering into the flesh of those astounded and half-hostile watchers? Perhaps. . . ."

"They tell me that she has also danced at Papeete — before the white men of the steamships," the Dutchman was informing us.

At that, from the step, from the moon-blue huddle of the castaway, there came a sound. With a singular clarity of divination I built up the thought, the doubt, the bitter perturbation in the fellow's mind. The woman had danced then at Papeete, the cross-roads, the little Paris of mid-seas. And before the white men from steamers — the white men that go back!

Moved by projects deeper and more devious than ours, the Dutchman made haste to cover up what seemed to have been an overshot. Frankly he turned his attention to the outcast.

"By the God, then, my dear Signet, have you considered?"

He knew well enough that Signet had "considered." He could see as well as I that Signet was a changed man. But he must "pile it on."

"There, my dear sir, you have it. That 'hunch'! That 'sure fire'! Do you think I do not know that New York of yours? Such a dance as that! You must believe me. If you were but a man of energy, now. . . ." With the utmost deliberation he launched upon a tirade of abuse. "But, no, you are not a man of energy, not a man to take things in your hands. The obstacles are too big. Those three husbands! You might even take that woman, that lovely, royal dancing woman — you, my



dear sir, a common street snipe. What would a woman like that, with that novel, impassioned, barbaric, foreign dance, be worth to a man on your Broadway? Eh? But obstacles! Obstacles! You have her not on Broadway. It is too many thousand miles, and you have no money. But see, if you were a man to grasp things, a man to 'hit the nail in the head,' to 'boost,' to 'go big' — then would not a man like me, who turns everything to gold — would he not say to you quickly enough, 'See here, my dear sir, but let me put so much money into the undertaking myself'?"

Under the explosions of cigar smoke, Signet continued to hold the trader with his eyes; seemed to consume him with the fixed, dry fire of his gaze. Not fathoming, as with a singular intuition I had fathomed, the profound purposes of the Dutchman, Signet saw only the implied promise in his words. . . . The trader broke out once more with a sardonic and calculated spleen:

"But, no! Obstacles! A sniveling little animal sees only obstacles. The obstacle not to be mounted over — those three husbands. There they lie to-night on Nakokai's platform — this beautiful, incredible 'Queen Daughter' — this gold goddess of the 'Shame Dance' — and about her those three husbands. Ah, my dear sir, but their big, lithe muscles! That is too much! To imagine them leaping up at the

alarm in the moonlight, the overpowering and faithful husbands. No, he cannot put out his hand to take the gift. *Pah!* He is a criminal in nature, but he is afraid of the police, even here. He is not a man for the big life in these islands. He will never do anything. Those faithful, strong watchdogs of husbands! Those strong destructive muscles! Dear, good God, that is too much to think of. . . . Look, my dear sir!"

He was speaking to me, as if Signet were less than the very pebbles at the step. He got up, striking the floor heavily with his boots, and I followed him into the house, where he took a lighted candle from a stand. Buried in our shadows, silent-footed, Signet pursued us as the trader had meant him to do. I persist in saying that I perceived the thing as a whole. From the first I had divined the maneuver of the Dutchman.

"Look!" he repeated, flinging open a door and thrusting in the candle to cast its light over ranks and ranges of metal. It was the gunroom of the Residence. Here dwelt the law. Shot-guns, repeating rifles, old-style revolvers, new, blue automatics. An arsenal!

"Big brown muscles!" he cried, with a ponderous disdain. "What are they? What is the strongest brown man? *Puff!* To a man of purpose and indomitable will like me! Obstacles? Three husbands? *Puff-Puff-Puff!*

Like that! . . . But all that will never be of use to *him*. That Signet! No, he is a street snipe who will steal a pocketbook and call it a crime. He is afraid to grasp. . . . But it is close in here, is it not?"

It was too bald. He stepped across the floor, unlatched and threw open the blind of the window, letting the candlelight stream forth upon a mass of bougainvillea vine without.

"I keep this door locked; you can imagine that," he laughed, returning and shutting us out of the gunroom. He twisted the key; put it in his pocket. And there, at the back, that window-blind stood open.

He stared at Signet, as if the beachcomber were just discovered.

"You are hopeless, my dear sir."

"Let us have a drink," he shifted.

For Signet he poured out a tumblerful of raw gin. The fellow took it like a man in a daze — the daze of a slowly and fiercely solidifying resolution. It shivered in his hand. A habit of greed sucked his lips. Into his mouth he took a gulp of the spirits. He held it there. His eyes searched our faces with a kind of malignant defiance. Of a sudden he spat the stuff out, right on the floor. He said nothing. It was as if he said: "By God! if you think I need *that*! No! You don't know me!"

He stalked out of the door. When we followed as far as the veranda we saw him making off into the striped light to the left. . . .

"Why did you call it the 'Shame Dance,' Mynheer?" We were seated again.

"Of course, my dear sir, it is not that, but it has a sound so when the Kanakas speak it. The woman spoke the name. If it is a Polynesian word I have not heard it before. 'Shemdance.' Like that."

"A good name, though. By jingo! a darn good name. Eh, Mynheer?"

But the trader's head was turned in an attitude of listening. Triumphant listening — at the keyhole of the striped, moonlit night. I heard it, too — a faint disturbance of the bougainvillea foliage around two sides of the house, near the window standing open to the gun room.

Of course the amazing thing was that the man fooled us. In the Dutchman's heart, I believe, there was nothing but astonishment at his own success. Signet, on the face of it, was the typical big talker and little doer; a flaw in character which one tends to think imperishable. He fitted so precisely into a certain pigeonhole of humankind. . . . What we had not counted on was the fierceness of the stimulus — like the taste of blood to a carnivore, or, to the true knight, a glimpse of the veritable Grail.

All the following day I spent on board overseeing the hundred minor patchings and calkings a South Sea trader will want in port.



When I went ashore that evening, after sundown, I found the Dutchman sitting in the same chair on the veranda, blowing smoke out into the afterglow. There was the illusion of perfect continuity with the past. Yesterday, to-day, to-morrow. Life flowed like a sleeping river, it would seem.

But this was the status of affairs. The three brown music makers, sons-in-law to an island queen, lay on a platform somewhere within the edge of the bush heavier by ounces with thirty-two caliber slugs, awaiting burial. And Signet, guttersnipe, beachcomber, and midnight assassin, was lodged in the "calaboose," built stoutly in a corner of the biggest and reddest of the Dutchman's godowns. As for the royal dancing woman, I was presently, in the trader's phrase, to "have a look at her."

At his solicitation I followed around the house, past the gun-room window (locked fast enough now, you may be sure), and up steeply through a hedged, immaculate garden which witnessed to the ordered quality of the owner's mind. At the upper end, under a wall of volcanic tufa, we came to a summerhouse done in the native style, stilts below, palmiste thatch above, and walled on three sides only with hanging screens of bamboo. Striking through this screen from the west, the rose and green of the afterglow showed the woman as in a semi-luminous cavern, seated cross-legged in the

The scenes which follow are of technical interest largely for the manner in which they carry the reader in a somewhat leisurely manner over important developments, heightening, rather than lowering his interest. This, of course, is the advantage of this type of first-person narration. For stories which, like this one, cover a rather complicated and shifting plot, the interest is easily maintained through the medium of the chief actor-raconteur. All of this startling development follows quite naturally upon Signet's amazing first step to solve his problem.

center of the platform, her hands dropped between her knees, and her large, dark eyes fixed upon the sea beyond the roof of the Residence below.

Was it the perfect immobility of defiance and disdain? Not once did her transfixed gaze take us in. Was it the quiescence of defeat and despair — that level brooding over the ocean which had been to her, first and last, a cradle and a roadway for her far, adventurous pilgrimages? She sat there before our peering eyes, the sudden widow, the daughter of potentates brought low, the goddess of an exuberant and passionate vitality struck with quietude; mute, astounded by catastrophe, yet unbowed. The beauty of that golden-skinned woman abashed me.

It did not abash the Dutchman. His was another and more indomitable fiber. It is fine to succeed, beyond expectation, detail by detail of strategy. His hands were clean. He remained the perfect administrator. Had there been no other way, he would not have flinched at any necessary lengths of wholesale or retail butchery. Still, it was nice to think that his hands were spotless. For instance, if that gunboat, with its purple-whiskered Amsterdammer of a captain, should just now happen in.

His face glowed in the dusk. His eyes shone with frank calculations. Fists on hips, head thrust out, one saw him casting up the sum of

his treasure trove. . . . But he was an epicure. He could wait. It was even delightful to wait. When I turned away he came down with me, his hands still on his hips and his eyes on the gently emerging stars.

The man was extraordinary. Sitting on the veranda, bombarding the direction of the fore-shore with that huge, deliberate fusillade of cigar smoke, he talked of home, of his boyhood on the dike at Volendam, and of his mother, who, bless her! was still alive to send him cheeses at Christmas time.

It was midnight and the moon was rising when I got away and moved down toward the beach where the dinghy waited. The horizontal ray struck through the grating of the "calaboose" at the corner of the godown I was skirting. I saw the prisoner. The upright shadow of an iron bar cut his face in two, separating the high, soiled cheeks each with an eye.

"You mustn't leave him get at her!"

I tell you it was not the same man that had come swimming and sniveling out to the schooner less than forty hours before. Here was a fierce one, a zealot, a flame, the very thin blade of a fine sword.

"Listen, Dole, if you leave that devil get at her ——"

His eyes burned through me. He failed completely to accept the fact that he was done. His mind, ignoring the present, ran months



ahead. With a flair of understanding, thinking of those three travesties of husbands and the wife who was no wife, I perceived what he meant.

I left him. He was a wild man, but the quality of his wildness showed itself in the fact that he squandered none of it in shaking the bars, shouting or flinging about. His voice to the last, trailing me around the next corner, held to the same key, almost subdued.

“By God! if that —— gets at her, I’ll — I’ll ——”

“You’ll what?” I mused. You see, even now I couldn’t get rid of him as the drifter, the gutter Hamlet, the congenital howler against fate. “You’ll what?” I repeated under my breath, and I had to laugh.

I got the vessel under way as soon as I came aboard. The Dutchman’s shipment of copra was arranged for — a week, two, three weeks (as the wind allowed) — and I was to return from the lower islands, where my present cargo was assigned, and take it on.

As we stood offshore under the waxing moonlight, as I watched the island, gathering itself in from either extremity, grow small and smaller on the measureless glass of the sea, the whole episode seemed to swell up in my mind, explode, and vanish. It was too preposterous. Thirty-eight hours chosen at random out of ten

thousand empty Polynesian years — that in that wink of eternity five human lives should have gone to pot simultaneously — a man wasn't to be taken in by that sort of thing.

Through twelve days it remained at that. Discharging cargo in the furnace of Coco Inlet, if my thoughts went back to Taai, it was almost with the deprecating amusement a man will feel who has been had by a hoax. If those minstrel husbands were murdered and buried; if that Broadway imp sweated under the red-hot roof of the godown; if that incomparable, golden-skinned heiress of cannibal emperors sat staring seaward from the gilded cage of the Dutchman, awaiting (or no longer awaiting) the whim of the epicure — if indeed any one of them all had ever so much as set foot upon that microscopic strand lost under the blue equator — then it was simply because some one had made it up in his head to while me away an empty hour. I give you my word, when at noon of the thirteenth day the mountain of Taai stood up once more beyond the bows, I was weary of the fantasy. I should have been amazed, really, to find a fellow named Signet housed in the Dutchman's private jail.

As a matter of fact, Signet was not in the jail.

When I went ashore in mid-afternoon, wondering a little why no naked biscuit-beggars or gin swallows had swum out to bother me that day, I found the trader of Taai sitting on his

veranda, blowing puffs of smoke from those fine Manila Club perfectos out into the sunshine. Beside him leaned a shiny, twelve-gauge pump gun which he jostled with an elbow as he bade me by word and gesture to make myself at home.

I'm quite certain I looked the fool. My eyes must have stuck out. Half a dozen times I started to speak. With some vacant, fatuous syllable I tried to break the ice. Strange as it sounds, I was never so embarrassed in my life.

For the trader of Taai, the blatantly obvious proprietor of the island's industry and overlord of its destinies — sitting there before me now with a pump gun touching his elbow — was this fellow Signet.

Till now I don't know precisely what had happened; that is to say, none of the details of the act, horrid or heroic as they may have been. All I seemed to have was a memory of the Dutchman's voice: "Why do you not kill *me*? Ha-ha-ha! Then you could take my property." And again an echo of his disdainful laughter at that fool, "Ha-ha-ha!" as, on some midnight, he had kicked his dinner guest and his "coolie cotton pants" out into the rain. . . . Why not, indeed? But who now was the "fool"?

Signet, in the course of the afternoon, brought forth gravely a bill of sale, making over in an orderly fashion to B. R. Signet, New York, U. S. A., the real and personal property

There are other obstacles in Signet's way, of course. The Dutchman, for one, and he has been eliminated by the time Dole returns again. Now there remain but two others: Signet must learn the magic tune which inspires his Queen Daughter's dance. And he must get her to Broadway. Dole finds him working on the first and giving intensive thought to the second. When the scene ends he has actually embarked upon the second.



of the trading station at Taai, and "signed," in the identical, upright, Fourteenth Street grammar-school script, by "the Dutchman." . . . I understood Signet. Signet understood me. The thing was not even an attempt at forgery. It was something solely formal — as much as to say: "This is understood to be the basis of our mutual dealings. You will see I am owner of this place."

As for the Dutchman:

"Oh, the Dutchman? Well, he decided to go away. Go home."

Before the incalculable sang-froid of this rail-bird, movie usher, alley dodger and hanger-on at dancing academies, I could not so much as summon up the cheek to ask what he had done with the body. You'll say I ought to have acted; that I ought at least to have got up and left him. That shows two things — first, that you've never been a trader in the islands; second, that you cannot at all comprehend how — well, how *stunning* he was. Sitting there, a single fortnight removed from cotton pants and the beach, crime-stained, imperturbable, magnificent! Spawn of the White Lights! Emperor of an island! How's that?

"It's a rich island," he impressed upon me with an intention I was yet to plumb. "Dole," he exclaimed, "it's a gold mine!"

"Is — is *she* here?" I ventured to demand at last.

"Is she? Say! Come and have a look."

I was between laughing and wincing at that identical "have a look."

Going up the garden, Signet let me know that the woman was in love with him. I might believe it or not. She would do anything for him.

"*Anything!*" he exclaimed, standing squarely still in the path. And in his eyes I was somehow relieved to find a trace of wonder.

Obstacles! All his life had been a turning back from small, insurmountable obstacles. Of a sudden he beheld really vast obstacles tumbling down, verily at a touch. Here was just one more of them. By a lucky chance this "Queen Daughter" did not know by whose hand she had been made thrice a widow; it was the simplest thing to suppose it the trader, the same big, blond, European man who had presently removed her "for safety" to the summerhouse behind the Residence. . . . And from the trader, by a gesture of melodramatic violence, the other and slighter man had set her free. . . . Perhaps even that would not have intrigued her essentially barbaric interest as much as it did had it not been for his amazing attitude of, well, let's say, "refrainment." His almost absurdly fastidious concern for what the West would call "the sanctity of her person." You can imagine — to a Marquesan woman! That! She was not ugly.

As her gaze, from the platform, dwelt upon

the shrewd, blade-sharp features of the man beside me, the elementary problem in her eyes seemed to redouble the peculiar, golden, Aryan beauty of her face. Let me tell you I am human. Perhaps Signet was human, too. Standing there, encompassed by the light of that royal and lovely woman's eyes, there was surely about him a glow — and a glow not altogether, it seemed to me, of "Smith's nickel and Jones's dime." I could have laughed. I could have kicked him. The impostor! Even yet I had failed to measure the man.

Back on the veranda again, dinner eaten, and dusk come down, Signet brought out an old guitar from among the Dutchman's effects (it had belonged probably to that defunct nephew of the dress clothes), and as he talked he picked at the thing with idle fingers. Not altogether idle, though, I began to think. Something began to emerge by and by from the random fingerings — a rhythm, a tonal theme.... Then I had it, and there seemed to stand before me again the swarded "high place," with torches flaring over upturned faces and mounting walls of green. Almost I sensed again the beat in my blood, the eye-ravishing vision of that gold-brown flame of motion, that voluptuous priestess.

"Oh, yes. That!" I murmured. "It's got something — something — that tune.... But how can you remember it?"

"*She* helps me out. I'm trying to put it in shape."

Indeed, when I left that night, and before my oarsmen had got me a cable's length from the beach, I heard the strumming resumed, very faintly, up in the dark behind the Residence; still tentatively, with, now and then through the flawless hush of the night, the guiding note of a woman's voice. (A woman profoundly mystified.)

A rehearsal? For what? For that almost mythical Broadway half around the bulge of the world? Had the fool, then, not got beyond *that*? Yet?

Here he was, lord of the daughter of a queen, proprietor of a "gold mine." For Signet was not to be hoodwinked about the commercial value of Taai. All afternoon and evening, as through the two days following, while my promised cargo was getting ferried out under the shining authority of the pump gun, he scarcely let a minute go by without some word or figure to impress upon me the extent of his "possessions." To what end?

Well, it all came out in a burst on the third evening, my last there. He even followed me to the beach; actually, regardless of the Dutchman's nephew's boots and trouser legs, he pursued me out into the shallows.

"A gold mine! Don't be a damned boob, Dole. You can see for yourself, a big proposi-



tion for a guy like you, with a ship and everything ——”

Upon me he would heap all those priceless “possessions.” Me! And in exchange he would ask only cabin passage for two from Taai beach to the Golden Gate! Only deck passage! Only anything!

“Set us down there, me and her, that’s all. I’ll give you a bill of sale. Why, from where you look at it, it’s a *find*! It’s a lead-pipe cinch! It’s taking candy away from a baby, man!”

“Why don’t you keep it, then?”

The soul of his city showed through. I saw him again as I had seen him swimming out in his cotton pants, with that low-comedy whisker and that consuming little greedy nickel hope of paradise. Even the gestures.

“No, but can’t you see, Dole? I got a bigger thing up my sleeve. God’llmighty, d’you think I’m a *farmer*? You could go big here; I don’t go at all. I ain’t that kind. But put me down in New York with that woman there and that there dance — and that tune — Say! You don’t understand. You can’t imagine. Money? Say! And not only money. Say! I could take that up to Glauber’s Academy, and I could say to Glauber, ‘Glauber,’ I could say ——”

I had to leave him standing there, up to his knees in the inky water, heaping me frankly

with curses. I shall not repeat the curses. At the end of them he bawled after me:

“But I’ll get there! You watch me all the same, all the same, you damn ——”

The reason I didn’t up-anchor and get out that night was that when I came aboard I discovered not far from my berth the unobtrusive loom of that Dutch gunboat, arrived for a “look-in” at last.

The only thing for me to do was to sit tight. If, when the state of the island’s affairs had been discovered, there should be want of explanation or corroboration, it would be altogether best for me to give it. I wasn’t yet through trading in those waters, you understand.

But Signet was no fool. He, too, must have seen the discreet shade of the visitor. When the morning dawned, neither he nor the royal dancer from the Marquesas was to be found. Some time in that night, from the windward beach, ill-manned and desperate, the royal sailing canoe must have set forth tumultuously upon its pilgrimage again.

I sat in a place in Honolulu. Soft drinks were served, and somewhere beyond a tidy screen of palm fronds a band of strings was playing. Even with soft drinks, the old instinct of wanderers and lone men to herd together had put four of us down at the same table. Two remain vague — a fattish, holiday-

making banker and a consumptive from Barre, Vermont. For reasons to appear, I recall the third more in detail.

He let me know somewhere in the give-and-take talk that he was a railway telegraph operator, and that, given his first long vacation, an old impulse come down from the days of the Hawaiian *hula* phonograph records, had brought him to the isle of delight. He was disappointed in it. One could see in his candid eyes that he felt himself done out of an illusion, an illusion of continuous dancing by girls in rope skirts on moonlit beaches. It was an intolerable waste of money. Here, come so far and so expensively to the romantic goal, he was disturbed to find his imagination fleeing back to the incredible adventure of a Rock Island station, an iron-red dot on the bald, high plain of eastern Colorado — to the blind sun-flare of the desert — to the immensity of loneliness — to the thundering nightly crisis of the “Eleven-ten,” sweeping monstrous and one-eyed out of the cavern of the West, grating, halting, glittering, gossiping, yawning, drinking with a rush and gurgle from the red tank — and on again with an abrupt and always startling clangor into the remote night of the East. . . .

He shifted impatiently in his chair and made a dreary face at the screening fronds.

“For the love o’ Mike! Even the rags they play here are old.”

With this scene the dénouement proper begins. Here is the unraveling of the ends. First, the reader wants to know, Did Signet get to New York and did the dance prove the "sure-fire hunch" that would "make big"? In Honolulu, Dole — and the reader — learn.



The consumptive was telling the banker about the new coöperative scheme in Barre, Vermont.

"For the love o' Mike!" my friend repeated. "That ain't a band; it's a historical s'ciety. Dead and buried! Next they'll strike up that latest novelty rage, 'In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree'! . . . Now will you listen to that. Robbin' the cemetery!"

He needn't have asked me to listen. As a matter of fact I had been listening for perhaps a hundred seconds; listening, not as if with the ears, but with the deeper sensory nerves. And without consciously grasping what the air was I had suffered an abrupt voyage through space. I saw a torch-lit sward, ringed with blue and saffron faces and high forest walls; I saw the half-nude, golden loveliness of a Polynesian woman shaken like a windy leaf. And the beat of a goat-hide drum was the beat of my blood. I felt my shoulders swaying.

I looked at the young man. His face expressed a facetious weariness, but his shoulders, too, were swaying.

"What tune is that?" I asked, in a level tone.

His contemptuous amazement was unfeigned.

"Holy Moses! man. Where you been?"

He squinted at me. After all, I might be "stringing him." "That," he said, "is as old

as Adam. It was run to death so long ago I can't remember. That? That's 'Paragon Park.' That is the old original first 'Shimmie' dance — with whiskers two feet long."

"The original what?"

"Shimmie! *Shimmie!* Say, honest to God, don't you know ——?" And with his shoulders he made a wriggling gesture in appeal to my wits, the crudest burlesque, it seemed, of a divinely abominable gesture in my memory. . . .

"That?" he queried. "Eh?"

"Shimmie," I echoed, and, my mind skipping back: "*Shemdance! Shame Dance! . . . I see!*"

"Why?" he demanded, intrigued by my preoccupation.

"Nothing. It just reminded me of something."

Then he lifted a hand and smote himself on the thigh. "Me, too! By jinks! Say, I'd almost forgot that."

He hitched his chair upon me; held me down with a forefinger.

"Listen. That was funny. It was one night — last fall. It was just after Number Seventeen had pulled out, westbound about one-forty in the morning. There wasn't anything else till six-one. Them are always the hardest hours. A fellow's got to stay awake, see, and nothin' to keep him — unless maybe a coyote howlin' a mile off, or maybe a bum

knockin' around among the box cars on the sidin', or, if it's cold, the stove to tend. That's all. Unless you put a record on the old phonograph and hit 'er up a few minutes now and then. Dead? Say, boy!

"Well, this night it was a bum. I'm sittin' there in the coop, countin' my fingers and listenin' to Limon calling off car numbers to Denver — just like that I'm sittin' — when I hear somethin' out in the waitin' room. Not very loud. . . . Well, I go out there, and there's the bum. Come right into the waitin' room.

"Bum! If he wasn't the father and mother and brother and sister of the original bum, I'll eat my hat. Almost a Jew-lookin' guy, and he'd saw hard service. But he's got a kind o' crazy glitter in his eye.

"'Well,' says I, just like that, 'well, what do you want?'

"He don't whine; he don't handle the pan. He's got that look in his eye.

"'My woman is out in them box cars,' says he. 'I'm goin' to bring her in here where it's warm.' That's what he says. Not '*can* I bring her in?' but '*goin*' to bring her in'! From a *hobo*!

"Can you imagine? It makes me think. It comes to me the guy is really off his trolley. To keep him calm I says, 'Well ——'

"He goes out. 'I'm shed o' *him*,' I says to

Observe how the title enters the story here to increase the satisfaction of the reader. "Shimmie. . . . *Shemdance! Shame Dance!* . . . I see!" exclaims Dole, and the reader, with him, gathers the full significance of the name which the Dutchman's native informants had caught after that night when they first saw the Queen Daughter dance.

A story's title may be one of its most important assets. Mr. Steele's title here falls into that category. The title should first be arresting in itself; but to gain its full effectiveness there should be a subtly cryptic quality about it; a new twist bringing its real significance home to the reader toward the close of the story. It will be interesting for the student to attempt devising substitute titles for this short story to see whether another is possible which carries the cryptic quality of "The Shame Dance."



myself. Not a bit. About three minutes and here he comes trottin' back, sure enough, bringin' a woman with him. Now, Mister — What's-y'r-name — prepare to laugh. That there woman — listen — make up your face — she's a *nigger*!

“He says she ain't a nigger.

“‘Mexican?’ says I.

“‘No,’ says he.

“I give her another look, but I can't make much out of her, except she's some kind of a nigger, anyhow. She's sittin' on the bench far away from the light, and she's dressed in a second-hand horse blanket, a feed sack, and a bran'-new pair of ar'tics. And she don't say a word.

“‘Well,’ says I, ‘if she ain't some kind of nigger, I'll eat my ——’

“But there he is, all of a sudden, squarin' off in front o' me, his mug stuck up and his eyes like a couple o' head lights. Imagine! The guy ain't got enough meat on his bones for a rest'rant chicken. Honest to God, he looked like he'd been through a mile o' sausage mill. But crazy as a bedbug. And there's somethin' about a crazy man ——

“‘Hold y'r gab!’ says he. To *me*! That gets my goat.

“‘Just for that,’ says I, ‘you can get out o' this station. And don't forget to take your *woman* along with you. Get out!’

“‘Get out *hell!*’ says he. He sticks his mug right in my face.

“‘That woman you speak so light of,’ says he, ‘is a queen. A Canuck queen,’ says he.

“‘I had to laugh. ‘Since when was there queens in Canada?’ says I. ‘And since when has the Canuck queens been usin’ stove polish for talcum powder?’

“‘The guy grabs me by the coat. Listen. He was strong as a wire. He was deceivin’. A wire with ten thousand volts into it.

“‘Look at me!’ says he, breathin’ hard between his teeth. ‘And take care!’ says he. ‘I’m a man no man can monkey with. I’m a man that’ll go through. I’m stained with crime. I’ve waded through seas o’ blood. Nothin’ in heaven or earth or hell can stop me. A month from now rubes like you’ll be glad to crawl at my feet — an’ wipe their dirty mugs on the hem o’ that there woman’s skirt. . . . Now listen,’ says he. ‘Get the hell into that there box o’ yourn over there and be quiet.’

“‘Crazy as a loon. I hope to die! the guy was *dangerous*. I see that. It come to me it’s best to humor him, and I go into the coop again. I sit there countin’ my fingers and listenin’ to Denver tellin’ back them car numbers to Limon again. By and by I’m jumpy as a cat. I get up and stick a record in the old machine. . . . That’s what brings the whole thing back to mind. That record is this ‘Paragon Park.’

"First thing I know I'm out in the waitin' room again. And what you think I see? I give you a hundred guesses. . . ."

"I'll take one," I said to him. "What you saw was the finest exhibition of the 'Shimmie' you ever clapped an eye upon. Am I right?" The young fellow's mouth hung open. He stared at me.

"Half undressed! Honest! That nigger woman! Horse blanket, feed sack, ar'tics — where was they? Shimmie? Can you imagine, in that there prairie depot at three in the mornin', and a wind howlin' under the floor? Say! Well, I can't tell you, but talk about *Shimmie*! Say, she's like a dead one come to life."

"Yes," I agreed, "yes. . . . But what about the man?"

"Well, that man, now. The record's comin' to the end and I go back in to start it over. And here's this hobo, come in behind me.

"'What's that?' says he, pointin' to the record I got in my hand.

"Then he grabs it and looks it over. He keeps turnin' it round and round and round, starin' at it.

"'I hope you'll know it again,' says I, with a laugh.

"My laugh seems to set him off into a shiver. Then down he throws that record o' mine onto the floor and stamps on it; busts it into a mil-

The telegraph operator's story writes *finis* to Signet's problem. He failed to solve it. And in his conflict he was beaten not by any conquerable obstacle. Fate stepped in, when victory seemed but a month away, to rob him of the fruits of his tragic trek back to Broadway. This is the most effective type of conflict, when it can be naturally, realistically introduced. Notice here how abruptly, how finally, it destroys Signet's hopes. He has conquered every obstacle in his path, and we may believe that there have been many on those thousands of miles from Taai to the midnight scene in the railroad station. He has conquered man and distance. The driving force of his obsession, once the first step was taken, had led him over every difficulty. But Fate is too much for him. It had him beaten from the start. Here is high tragedy, though its protagonist is but a gutter-snipe.



lion pieces under his boots. I've been tellin' you he's crazy.

"'Here there!' I yell at him.

"He looks at me. Looks right through me, it seems, and beyond, with them there red-rimmed eyes. 'Seas o' blood,' says he. That's all. 'Seas o' blood!'

"Then he turns around, walks out into the waitin' room, and sits down in a heap in the farthest corner. Never another peep. There he sits till daylight, and the nigger woman, with the horse blanket on again, she sits there beside him, holdin' his hand.

"'What's up with him?' I ask her.

"She says somethin' in Mexican — or some language, anyway. But I see she don't know any more 'n me. . . . It's just like this. The current's gone out o' the wire. . . . Last I ever see of 'em, she's leadin' him off in the sunrise toward the box cars — leadin' him by the hand. . . . Now did you ever hear a funnier experience than that to happen to a man?"

"No," I said, "I never did."

"You had to pity him," he added.

"Yes," I agreed. . . . And I could think of her leading him by the hand.

I saw Signet again. It was on my first and last voyage to the Marquesas. Under the shadow of a mountain, on a stone platform facing the sea, sat Signet, quite nude save for a

There remains but one more thread to be unraveled, and then all of the reader's questions are answered. How could Fate have beaten Signet? How could the Queen Daughter's dance and her melody have found their way to Broadway? Some one saw her in Papeete? ventures Dole. But no; there is a deep pathos in the final element of the dénouement. Notice that this ending, while it naturally surprises the reader, was foreshadowed earlier in the story when the Dutchman remarked that the Queen Daughter had danced in Papeete — "before the white men of the steamships."

The student will do well to study carefully "The Shame Dance," filling in the gaps of analysis where the author has left them. Observe in particular the handling of the time element of the story. No real indication is given of how many months — or years — elapse from the first scene to the last. And yet the unity of the story is never lost.

loin cloth, and with an unequivocal black beard falling down on his breast. There was a calmness about him. "How did you come here?" I asked, at length.

"She wanted it," he said.

"She's a wonderful woman," he said to me, "a wonderful woman. She would do anything for me, Dole. *Anything!* We've got a kid."

I made shift to get in a question I had carried long in mind. "Somebody beat you out at Papeete, then, after all?"

He turned upon me a faintly quizzical look.

"I mean, somebody saw her — some tourist — that time she danced at Papeete — Remember? — and got away with it?"

The thing seemed already so remote that he had to grope back. Then he laughed.

"Lord, no. Look here, Dole. It was her herself seen the thing at Papeete. On board a tourist boat. I found out about it since I learned her language good. Her and some others went aboard to dance the *hula* — same as always, you know. Then some of *them*, the tourists, understand — Well, they have to spring the latest thing from Broadway. And then this woman of mine — Well, you can imagine.

"Like a woman with a new hat. Got to run right off and show it to the whole damn length and breadth of the South Seas. That's

Reading "The Shame Dance" in the light of this whole study of short-story technique, the question naturally arises: Would the story have been as effective had third-person narration been used? What would have been the difficulties? Could Dole then have been made the chief actor? What obstacles would the author have encountered had Signet been made the chief actor? Could sympathy have been awakened easily for him? Could the story have been made shorter? Would it have been longer? What episodes, merely suggested here, would it have been necessary to present in direct action? Where would the story have begun?

Why is the second type of first-person narration more effective here than the first type?



all. . . . And once upon a time I thought I was bright. . . .”

Out of the half house at the rear of the platform came the daughter of a queen, bearing under one arm a prince of this island valley, and in the other hand a bowl of coconut wine for the visitor. And for her lord. For you will see that at last, despite the malignant thrusts and obstacles of destiny, this guttersnipe of Gotham had come to a certain estate.

When I left, he accompanied me slowly to the beach.

“You ought to like it here,” I said. “After all, the city could never have given you so much.”

“No,” he said. Wide-eyed, he took in the azure immensity of the sea. “No. Here a guy has got time to think, think, without any hurry or worry. . . . I been thinking, Dole, a lot. I ain’t going to say nothing about it, but Dole, I believe I got an idea coming along. No flivver this time. A real, sure-fire hunch. Something that’ll go big in the city. Big!”

And so I left him there in the shadow of the mountain, staring at the impassable sea. . . .

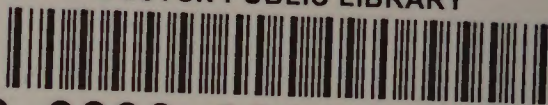








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